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FAMILY COMMUNICATION

Cohesion and Change

DAWN O. BRAITHWAITE, PAUL SCHRODT,
COLLEEN WARNER, AND KATHLEEN M. GALVIN

Eleventh Edition

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ROUTLEDGE

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“Like its predecessors, this edition of *Family Communication: Cohesion and Change* is outstanding. It presents current and classic research in a way that is both thought-provoking and accessible. Students will be drawn-in by the vivid examples and probing questions offered by the authors; instructors will appreciate the authors’ brilliant translation of complex theories and concepts for their students.”

—Anita L. Vangelisti, *University of Texas at Austin, USA*

“This edition continues a long-standing tradition of providing readers with a comprehensive yet contemporary view of family communication theory and research. Retaining its pedagogical focus, this text invites students to actively participate in their learning through the inclusion of case studies, thought-provoking data, expanded discussion questions, and interviews with family communication scholars. This text is a must-have for family communication instructors.”

—Scott A. Myers, *West Virginia University, USA*

Family Communication

Now in its eleventh edition, *Family Communication: Cohesion and Change* continues to provide students with a foundational, accessible, and inclusive overview of the family communication field.

The eleventh edition represents the plurality of today's families, helping students see themselves and think through how the up-to-date research and theory apply to their lives. It features a more concise narrative with streamlined central concepts that are more straightforward and engaging for students. Now presented in three sections, Communication and Family Lenses, Communication and Family Cohesion, and Communication and Family Adaptability, this edition's new features include learning objectives for each chapter, Family Portrait interviews with top scholars, a glossary of key definitions, and expanded Family Reflections discussion questions interspersed in the text.

This book is ideal for undergraduate courses in family communication, allied subjects in communication studies, family studies, nursing, and social work programs.

The accompanying Instructor and Student Resources provide free digital materials designed to test students' knowledge and save instructor's time when preparing lessons. Visit www.routledgelearning.com/familycommunication for interactive activities, practice quizzes, and more.

This enhanced eBook offers three new features to enhance learning. 1) Audio to help engage the reader with the concepts, 2) Website links to each Family Portrait Scholar, and 3) Flashcards at the end of each chapter.

Dawn O. Braithwaite (Ph.D., University of Minnesota) is a Willa Cather professor of communication studies emerita at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA. She has published six books and 160 articles and chapters, writing the "Communication Matters" blog for *Psychology Today*. Braithwaite received the National Communication Association Brommel Award for Family Communication and Becker Award for service. She is a NCA Distinguished Scholar and Past President.

Paul Schrodt (Ph.D., University of Nebraska-Lincoln) is the Philip J. and Cheryl C. Burguières professor in the department of communication studies at Texas Christian University, USA. He has published more than 130 journal articles and book chapters and has served as editor of *Communication Monographs*. Schrodt was awarded the National Communication Association's Bernard J. Brommel Award for Outstanding Scholarship in Family Communication.

Colleen Warner (Ph.D., University of Nebraska-Lincoln) is an associate professor of communication at the University of Missouri, USA. She is the author of 31 peer-reviewed journal articles and 14 book chapters and co-edited the book *Navigating relationships in the modern family: Communication, identity, and difference*. Warner is a family life educator and partners with family and child practitioners in her community as a family communication affiliate.

Kathleen M. Galvin (Ph.D., Northwestern University) was a professor of communication studies emerita at Northwestern University, USA. She co-authored or edited nine books with multiple editions and multiple chapters and articles. She was one of the founders of the National Communication Association's (NCA) Family Communication Division and received NCA's Becker Award for Distinguished Service. The NCA Family Communication Division created a teaching award in her honor.

A VIRTUAL TOUR OF FAMILY COMMUNICATION

PEDAGOGICAL FEATURES

This enhanced eBook offers three new features to enhance learning. 1) Audio to help engage the reader with the concepts, 2) Website links to each Family Portrait Scholar, and 3) Flashcards at the end of each chapter.

AUDIO

▶ Scripts

Each audio example is positioned appropriately within the text to enhance understanding of a given concept/topic/theory and can be played, paused and rewound using the integrated controls.

WEBSITE LINKS

Dr. Kellas' website https://www.jodykoenigkellas.com/

Each link connects to the Family Portraits scholar's website, allowing the reader to dig more into the scholar's research or connect directly with the

scholar.

FLASHCARDS

refer to other kinds of narratives that provide explanations or reasons for people's behaviors or situations; they may include explaining why a family member chose to divorce, decided to join the military, or retired at age 50.

refers to the tendency of individuals to withhold complaints and avoid confrontation with their partner or with other family members for fear of reprisal, compared two potential explanations for how expressions of coercive power influence decisions to conceal secrets.

are relationship agreements that highlight "what behaviors are required, preferred, or prohibited in various social contexts."

define “what counts as what” and help family members understand why they should not do or say something

refers to a group of people within a family system who have established a pattern of connecting through social interaction.

involve information purposefully hidden or concealed by one or more family members.

occurs when the persons involved in the interaction possess equal status or power, as when siblings share messages or when parents and adult children work out problems together.

is a story of extraordinary proportions that is known to all members of the family and that serves to define what it means to be a family member

use a wide range of mediated channels to develop, enact, and change family relationships.

prescribe acceptable communication behavior:
how, when, where, and with whom to talk

a shared set of meanings, expectations, and rules for interaction that contributes to creating a relatively unique communication system

can be defined as narratives that provide a history or re-telling of what was experienced by family members.

are ways in which each member of the family motivates and monitors the behavior of the other and is influenced, in turn, by the other person's previous actions

occurs when real or imagined power differences characterize the interactions.

Interactive flashcards are at the end of every chapter in the Key Words section. These can be used to review key terms; hovering over the flashcard will display the term’s definition.

Family Communication

Cohesion and Change

Eleventh Edition

Dawn O. Braithwaite,
Paul Schrodt,
Colleen Warner, and
Kathleen M. Galvin

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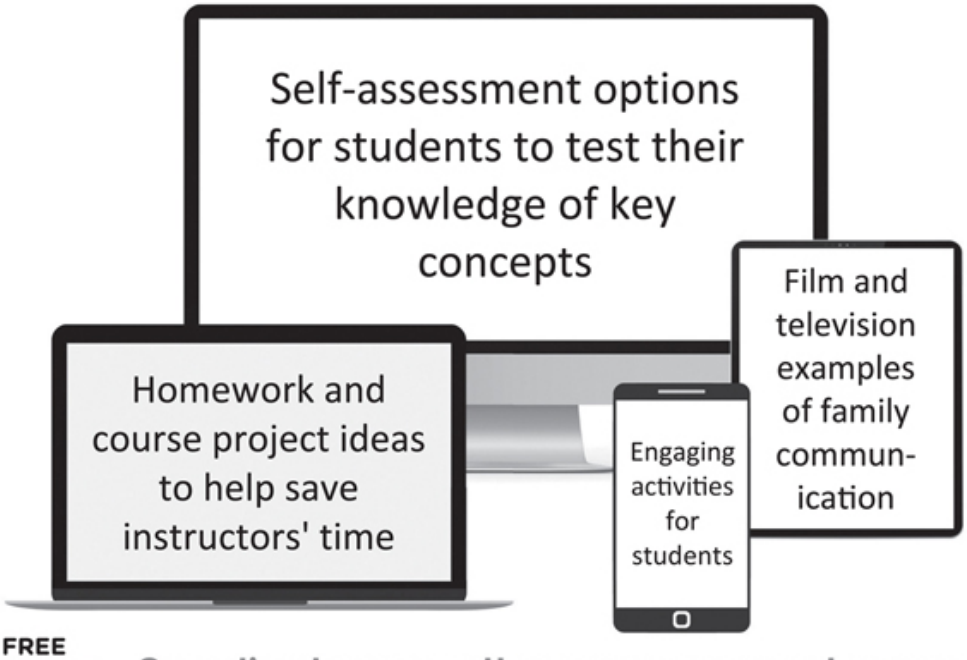
Family Communication

Now in its eleventh edition, *Family Communication: Cohesion and Change* continues to provide students with a foundational, accessible, and inclusive overview of the family communication discipline. The eleventh edition represents the plurality of today's families, helping students see themselves and think through how the up-to-date research and theory apply to their lives. It features a more concise narrative with streamlined key concepts that are more straightforward and engaging for students.


Self-assessment options for students to test their knowledge of key concepts
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To Chuck, my husband of 40 years, Chris my stepmom, family that are both legal and of choice (especially Walt and Pearl), my dear friends of the heart, especially Sandra Petronio who passed away as we finished the book, and the beagles. DOB

To my best friend and beautiful wife, Danielle, to the two young men I am proud to call my sons, Isaac and Eli, and to my extended Schrodt family with whom the laughter never ceases. PS

To my children and my loved ones – legal, biological, committed, and platonically intimate alike – who have brought new depths to my understanding of family and love. CW

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PREFACE

None of us can consume the news of the day, visit social media, talk with friends, or spend time with our own families and not confront many questions, strengths, changes, challenges, and opportunities surrounding communication in all aspects of family life. We hope you will find studying family communication as exciting and challenging as we do.

We are extremely pleased to be publishing the 11th edition of *Family Communication: Cohesion and Change*. Kathleen M. Galvin (1943–2022) and Bernard J. Brommel (1930–2018) started working on the book 45 years ago and published the first edition in 1982. It was the first textbook to explore the family experience from a communication perspective. College classes in family communication were starting up and only a small number of communication scholars were undertaking research on family. Much of the background information available for the early editions of the book came from family therapists, academic psychologists, and sociologists. Things started changing in the late 1980s, as family communication was becoming a distinct field of research in U.S. colleges and universities, aided by the existence of this book. The Family Communication Division was formed within the National Communication Association (NCA) in 1989.

Researchers and teachers do not start working in a cultural vacuum. In fact, as the early editions of this book were written, there were also significant changes happening in family life. For example, in the United States, people began marrying and having children later, if at all, and the divorce rate grew. The number of interethnic families was starting to rise, and gay and lesbian persons began to “come out of the closet” and be more public about their sexual orientation. There were also very public debates

over the status of the family – for instance, there was a highly publicized controversy in 1992 when the vice president of the United States criticized a television program that depicted a successful career woman choosing to become a single mother. During this time to the present, communication research was growing exponentially in numbers and breadth of topics explored.

From the very first edition of this book, the definition of "family" that we discuss in Chapter 1 was intentionally broad and inclusive. Then and now, our definition of family reflects a strong commitment on the part of the different authors to represent families that have not always been understood or accepted, such as same-sex partners, international adoption, cohabiting families, chosen families, and multiethnic families. Thus, from the start, family was defined as "networks of people who live together over long periods of time bound by ties of marriage, blood, or commitment, legal or otherwise." You can see our current definition in Chapter 1 and compare it to this initial definition and see the similarities. One of the most important principles is if members consider themselves to be a family, we honor their self-definition. Over the years, as the definition of family has been fleshed out, this core principle remains.

As the 21st century began, the *Journal of Family Communication* published its first issue under the editorship of Thomas Socha, and the journal helped the field grow. Several key research and theory books were published. A family communication scholarship and service award was created at NCA in 1997 and named for Bernard Brommel. Professors Galvin, Braithwaite, and Schrodt have been recipients.

Anita Vangelisti published the *Handbook of Family Communication* in 2004, and other family communication books began. Dawn O. Braithwaite and Leslie A. Baxter published *Engaging Theories in Family Communication* in 2006, and in the second edition of the book in 2018, Elizabeth Suter and Kory Floyd joined Braithwaite. They reported on the 775 family communication studies authored by communication scholars since 1990. About 70% of these studies came after 2004, and the amount and quality of research continues to grow. This means there is a wealth of

recent information on which to build the content for the 11th edition of our book. Today, most communication departments in colleges and universities now offer one or more courses on family communication, and several graduate programs have a specialty in family communication.

The subject matter of family communication has grown in breadth and depth. As work on the first edition began, communication in marriages dominated the research agenda. Today, scholars address questions related to family members' interactions within a wide range of families, across the lifespan, and within multiple cultures. We are pleased to see that research is growing internationally. Researchers now use a variety of different quantitative, qualitative, and critical research methodologies that have grown increasingly sophisticated with each passing decade.

The growth in family communication research and theory has dovetailed the development of the authorship team for *Family Communication: Cohesion and Change*. Kathleen Galvin and Bernard Brommel collaborated on the first five editions, and Carma L. Bylund joined for the next three editions. Dawn O. Braithwaite joined at the 9th edition and Paul Schrodt at the 10th edition. We are pleased to welcome Colleen Warner to the team on this 11th edition. We are deeply grateful for the contributions of earlier authors, just as we are excited to see what the future holds as new authors join the team.

REMEMBERING DR. KATHLEEN M. GALVIN, NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

We take this opportunity to pay a special tribute to Kathleen Galvin who passed away as we were starting work on this 11th edition. Kathy was the heart and soul of this book project, and we miss her very much. Kathy grew up in Queens, NY, and earned her bachelor's degree at Fordham University. She moved to Northwestern University, where she earned her MA and PhD degrees and spent her career there. Kathy was a key founder of the family communication field. All of us can picture her sitting in the audience when we presented research papers at communication conferences. She always knew who the up-and-coming family communication scholars were and went out of her way to get to know them, including each of us in the early days of our careers. In addition to her scholarship, Kathy was an outstanding and dedicated teacher and generous mentor who inspired generations of students. The NCA Family Communication Division created the Kathleen M. Galvin Family Communication Distinguished Teaching

and Mentoring Award in her memory, and the first award was presented in 2023. Kathy would have been very proud of the award, even though she never sought the spotlight. Kathy and husband Charlie married in 1973 and had three children and four grandchildren, who miss her very much, as do we.

Our basic premise of the book remains constant – to understand the role of communication as family members co-create and transform family systems. Our goal is to describe and explain family communication processes rather than to prescribe how family members should or should not communicate. Although it is tempting to want advice on how best to communicate in families, we know there are multiple ways to interact and be a well-functioning family. We believe you'll be in the best position to make informed choices about what to do and say to be a family when you have in-depth and up-to-date information.

FEATURES OF THE 11TH EDITION

A book project is always a work in progress. We made numerous updates and changes in this 11th edition based on detailed feedback from instructors using this book, as well as comments from our students. *New features* of the book include six key changes. First, we revised all chapters to keep pace with new research and changes in everyday family life, and all chapters have been edited for length to improve the reader's experience. Second, we divided the chapters into *three sections* of the book to represent the big picture of family communication more clearly: (a) Communication and Family Lenses, (b) Communication and Family Cohesion, and (c) Communication and Family Adaptability. Chapters were reordered under those categories (we include old chapter numbers below to help instructors). Third, we revised the format at the beginning of each chapter with *key questions* that overview the main themes, followed by *learning objectives*

for each chapter. Fourth, rather than put discussion questions at the end of chapters, we have "*Family Reflections*" questions at the end of each main section of the chapter to help you ponder concepts as you read. Fifth, we added a "*Family Portrait*" to each chapter that features a prominent family communication scholar talking about their background and work. Sixth, as before, you will see *key terms* bolded in each chapter, and we have added a full *glossary* of all key terms with their definitions at the end of the book.

Ongoing features of the book include beginning each chapter with *two case studies* to help you think about and apply the principles in the chapter. As you read the book, do compare these cases to your own family life experiences. Look for a "*Family Matters*" box in each chapter that summarizes the results of one research study in greater depth to highlight the theme of that chapter. As before, you will find *key terms* bolded in the text and listed at the end of each chapter, and we highlighted other *important concepts and definitions* in italics. We updated each chapter with new research findings, and throughout we paid special attention to issues of family diversity, inclusion and equity, and the effects of technology and social media.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

The first section (Chapter 1, Chapter 2, Chapter 3, Chapter 4) covers *Communication and Family Lenses*. As in the earlier versions of the book, the first three chapters establish the conceptual and theoretical foundations of the text. In Chapter 1, we present an introduction to family communication and how we define a family, highlighting the family as an interdependent, interactive system. We present a rearranged and updated overview of the contemporary state of the family, combining data on the current state of the family under an expanded set of family types. In Chapter 2, we discuss family communication as a transactional process, followed by two main perspectives on family communication: family communication as social construction, and family communication as

patterns and effects that impact family outcomes. We updated family supporting functions and influences of the family of origin that shape life in family systems. In Chapter 3, we discuss what family communication meta-theories and theories do, followed by descriptions of five family communication theories in greater depth. We added the communication theory of identity to this 11th edition, in addition to updating our discussions of the other four theories included in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4 (previously Chapter 10 in the 10th ed.), we cover family communication across stages of the lifespan, from prenatal through adulthood, exploring the developmental model of child development, a life-course perspective, and transitions between life stages. We discuss major transitions in adulthood and new data to explore how adults are entering and exiting family stages in diverse ways that counter preconceived notions about "normal" family structures and timelines.

The second section (Chapter 5, Chapter 6, Chapter 7, Chapter 8) covers *Communication and Family Cohesion*. In Chapter 5 (previously Chapter 4 in the 10th ed.), we explore the creation of family identity, including relational cultures, rules, secrets, networks, and stories. We focus on how a systems perspective on family influences how family members interact and navigate their everyday lives and co-construct their collective identity. In Chapter 6 (previously Chapter 5 in the 10th ed.), we focus on how families communicate to maintain their relationships and family system to keep functioning via confirmation and rituals, as well through verbal, nonverbal, and prosocial relational currencies within different family relationships. In Chapter 7, (previously Chapter 6 in the 10th ed.), we explore interaction to establish and alter family intimacy, focusing on commitment, self-disclosure, and sexuality, with an emphasis on sexual and gender minorities. We discuss effort, sacrifice, and forgiveness as communication bases of commitment, as well as barriers to intimacy in family systems. In Chapter 8 (previously Chapter 7 in the 10th ed.), we discuss role functions and how families learn and adjust their roles. We also explore communication in different family types, reflected in couple and family typologies that manifest meaningful differences in communication patterns and behaviors.

The third section (Chapter 9, Chapter 10, Chapter 11, Chapter 12) covers *Communication and Family Adaptability*. In Chapter 9 (previously Chapter 8 in the 10th ed.), we explore how individuals develop and communicate power and decision-making in family relationships. We discuss how power expands and is communicated, how families interact and make decisions, and decision-making types and processes. In Chapter 10 (previously Chapter 9 in the 10th ed.), we discuss family conflict as a communication process and present a model of conflict stages, as well as highlight conflict patterns, rules, and destructive conflict. We then explore constructive conflict patterns, strategies, and behaviors that help families communicate to manage and resolve conflict. In Chapter 11, we take a special focus on unexpected stress and how families communicate and cope with specific stressors that are unpredictable for families. We added sections on family trauma and on family resilience, focusing on communication-based strategies for crafting resilience in families. In Chapter 12, we discuss family health and well-being, strategies for physical and mental health, and financial and technological well-being. We outline and describe personal, instructional, and therapeutic approaches to improving family well-being. We end the book with some of our final thoughts on family communication now and into the future.

INSTRUCTOR AND STUDENT RESOURCES

We invited family communication scholar Dr. Jaclyn Marsh to develop materials linked in the enhanced eBook version of the text and in an online ancillary website. For *the enhanced e-Book version*, look for links to Dr. Marsh explaining a concept or theory, links to the Family Portraits scholars, and flashcards at the end of each chapter to help you review and study. For *the web-based ancillary*, look for links to video examples, activities, application assignments, and materials for instructors, including chapter outlines, project ideas, and sample exam questions (accessed via password).

You will find ancillary materials on the companion website at www.routledgelearning.com/familycommunication.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the contributions Routledge made to the book, specifically editor Felisa Salvago-Keyes, editorial assistants Sean Daly and Deanna Waistell, and our digital learning development editor, Emily Irvine, for working on the ancillary materials. We thank our insightful reviewers who provided thoughtful feedback on the last edition and helped crystalize our planning for the 11th edition. Routledge commissioned reviews of the book by Jessica Kratzer, Eryn Bostwick, Donna Pawlowski, Jean M. Gerard, Diana Karol Nagy, Patricia Sotirin, and other anonymous reviewers. We are grateful for their detailed information and helpful suggestions.

We thank Haley Decker of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for a careful and detailed analysis of chapter content across the 10th edition to help us prepare our work on the new edition. We appreciate Jaclyn Marsh for contributing new data for the opening chapter and Carol L. Tschampl-Diesing of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for careful proofreading assistance.

As always, our own family members are important teachers for us, especially as our family lives have changed significantly over recent years. We appreciate their patience, support, and unwitting contributions to some of the examples in the book. Our ongoing interactions with our wonderful students stimulate and challenge our thinking. Our brilliant university and disciplinary colleagues continue to contribute with new scholarship and by taking their work into communities. In addition, several of these colleagues are also part of our own research projects.

We hope that you will be captured by the importance and complexity of family communication and that you will find the study of family interactions to be a relevant, thought-provoking, and meaningful experience.

Dawn O. Braithwaite,
University of Nebraska-Lincoln Paul Schrodt,
Texas Christian University Colleen Warner,
University of Missouri

Dawn O. Braithwaite

Photograph by David Fitzgibbon

Paul Schrodt

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Colleen Warner

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SECTION 1

Communication and Family Lenses

CHAPTER 1

What Is a Family?

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BOX 1.1

What framework guides our exploration into today's families? Why is it important to understand how we define a family? What does it mean to frame and live in families as systems? What characteristics influence how family systems function? How do we characterize the diverse nature of contemporary family systems? What is the shape of modern families regarding coupling, parenting, and family generations? In this chapter, we survey our broad framing and definition of family, specifically, the family as a system, and we explore the broad diversity of family forms of the contemporary family. After reading this chapter, you will be able to

1. Articulate eight core beliefs about family.
2. Define a family and locate your own family in this definition.
3. Explain seven characteristics of family systems.

4. Understand and explain the diversity of contemporary family systems.
5. Understand and explain how family systems are made up of couple, parenting, and generational relationships.

NEW FAMILY TIES

Staci and Mike married soon after he returned from military service in Afghanistan. Mike was ten years older than Staci and uncertain about fatherhood. She persuaded him that children would bring joy and meaning to their lives, and he reluctantly agreed to support her dreams of having children. Soon after their marriage, Mina was born, followed quickly by Gwen. At this time, Mike was struggling with uncertainty about his career path and confronting periods of severe depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Within two years, he asked Staci for a divorce, citing her devotion to the girls and distance from him, as well as his need for independence.

After two years of being single, Staci started to date Adam, a colleague at work who had never married. Six months later, Staci and the girls moved in with Adam. Mike seldom contacted his daughters, and Mina and Gwen quickly became attached to Adam and his extended family. They often told people they felt like a real family for the first time. Staci and Adam worked long hours, her career flourished, and she moved quickly up the corporate ladder. After two years of living together, Adam proposed, expressing how much he loved Staci and the girls and how he anticipated adding more children to their lives. Adam was devastated to hear that Staci had no interest in having more children, and although they tried to continue their living arrangement, Adam's pressured pleas "for children of his own" led Staci to announce that she and the girls were leaving. Mina and Gwen were distraught at losing Adam, and although he tried to maintain contact, Staci discouraged the girls from seeing him.

After six years as a single parent, and the girls now away at college out-of-state, Staci married Angelo, a widower with two grown sons. They are rarely all together at the same time. Angelo is considerate of Mina and Gwen. They appreciate him and are glad their mother is not alone. They tell people Angelo is a good guy and introduce him as “my mom’s husband.”

GOALS AND FINANCES

Last week, Lacy’s retail company announced staffing layoffs and selected reduced employee hours due to poor sales figures in their shopping mall-based stores. Lacy feels like she has been punched in the stomach. As a 27-year-old wife and mother of her autistic son, Sean, Lacy is also providing economic support for her mother, who suffers from multiple sclerosis. Any drop in income will create major challenges for Lacy and her family. Lacy’s husband, Will, has a position at a local factory that pays less than her current income, but both incomes are necessary to keep the family afloat.

On top of the income loss, Lacy’s company dropped the tuition benefit she has been using to take classes at the local community college to become a registered nurse in respiration therapy. Lacy has four more classes to complete before finishing the program and starting on a new career track with better pay and benefits. Graduation would represent a major life milestone as she has been struggling to complete the program for five years while attempting to balance Sean’s needs and therapy, her work, and home.

Thankfully, Lacy has her godmother, Belle, in her life. Belle is Lacy’s best friend from the little town where they grew up in a neighboring state. Belle is like an aunt to Lacy and served as a support and sounding board for her as she grew up. Whenever things piled up, Lacy knew she could count on Belle to talk her through the problem and give her practical advice. Lacy had a long chat with Belle today via video chat to pour out her problems. After two hours of talking, Lacy feels better and now has some website links for government-supported tuition and loan programs that might allow her to finish her education and be in a better position to help her family.

Family life is a profound and central aspect of being human, yet no two people have the exact same experience, in part because of the unique communication patterns that emerge in each family system. Each individual, and the family system as a whole, has unique experiences and reactions, as we see in the different ways that Staci and her partners in the first case study conceptualized what they wanted in a family. Our goal in writing this book is to examine family interaction and relationships to help you better understand yourself and your own family strengths and challenges.

You bring your own expertise to this topic as a family member yourself. At the same time, your experience and expertise are also limited because you have likely lived in only one or a small number of family systems. Reading this book, you have the opportunity to reflect on a wide variety of knowledge and insights that will help you become better prepared to encounter a diversity of family experiences and family communication patterns.

Here in Chapter 1, first we will explore our framework for understanding family communication. Second, we will discuss how we are defining a family. Third, we explain how families function as systems. We complete the chapter with an overview of the contemporary family in terms of its diversity, as well as living in families in terms of coupling, parenting, and experiences across generations.

OUR FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING FAMILY COMMUNICATION

Throughout this book, we use a framework for understanding families based on two guiding principles. First, we highlight the family as a system of interconnected relationships (the focus of Chapter 1). Second, we highlight communication as the primary way families develop, create, maintain, and alter identity (the focus of Chapter 2). Keep these two guiding principles in mind as you read the book.

Overview of the Book

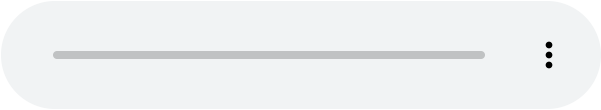
Once we better understand family systems and family communication in Chapters 1 and 2, in Chapter 3 we highlight a variety of family communication theories, which are practical tools to help us understand, function within, and bring about change in families. In Chapter 4, Chapter 5, Chapter 6, Chapter 7, Chapter 8, Chapter 9, Chapter 10, Chapter 11, Chapter 12, we cover important communication processes that create and guide family life, for instance, communicating to develop family identity, build family roles, handle conflict, or navigate stress. Our goal is to help you understand and apply what you are learning about family communication to your own family or other family experiences today and into the future.

Some unique features of each chapter in this book include

1. *Case Studies:* We begin each chapter with two short case studies to help you apply the knowledge.
2. *Family Matters*: We include in each chapter a short description of one relevant family communication research project in more depth.
3. *Family Portraits*: We offer a new feature in each chapter of a prominent family communication scholar to answer four questions about their family and research.
4. *Family Reflections*: We provide discussion questions at the end of each main chapter section. This will make it easier for you to find and apply knowledge as you read the chapter.
5. *Key Words*: We highlight key terms in each chapter that are bold-headed and defined. The key terms are listed at the end of the chapter. Look for a full *glossary* of all key terms and definitions at the end of the book.

Family communication is an important and extremely practical topic. You will get the most out of your reading if you apply the family communication concepts to your own experience. Concepts and examples that are both

familiar and different from your own experiences will be especially insightful and highlight the amazing diversity and complexity of today's families and the multiple ways to communicate and seek your most functional family life.



▶ Scripts

Core Beliefs About Families

Your authors hold certain basic beliefs that undergird our teaching and research and that provide a context for understanding how we approached writing this book. To start, we share eight core beliefs about families:

1. There is not one right way to be a family. Family life is as diverse as the persons who make up families. The "perfect" family does not exist.
2. Through communication, we build and reflect family relationships. In what we say and do, individuals and family systems define their identities and negotiate relationships with those inside and outside the family.
3. Each family works, and at times struggles, to create its own identity as family members experience and make sense of positive and stressful times. Families may be positive and affirming or dysfunctional and punishing. Families are always in flux, and the possibility for growth and change always exists.
4. Communication is the process by which family members create and share meanings in unique relational cultures. We literally talk families into (and out of) being.
5. Families interact and socialize members to their underlying values and beliefs about important life issues and actions.
6. Families reflect cultural communication patterns based on race and ethnicity, gender, power, and other significant in-group membership

influences that shape family beliefs, values, perceptions, and expectations.

7. Families involve multigenerational communication patterns. Members are influenced by the patterns of previous generations even as they create their own patterns, which in turn, will influence future generations, unless consciously altered.
8. In well-functioning families, members work at understanding and negotiating their communication patterns and recognize that developing and maintaining relationships takes effort. Family systems have the capacity to adapt, create connections, and manage conflict. In the best of circumstances, families seek to communicate effectively and productively.

You will notice throughout the book that we avoid presenting prescriptive "how-to" advice and simple solutions for family problems. Rather, we seek to introduce you to the diverse world of families and their complex communication patterns. We believe the ideas and examples presented will help you sharpen your own observational and analytical skills to make wise choices about how to communicate and navigate the complexities of life in your family.

Families develop a **relational culture**, which is a shared set of meanings, expectations, and rules for interaction that contributes to creating a family system.[1] We hope your increased understanding of family communication and your family culture will give you greater appreciation for the complexities and variations inherent in today's diverse family forms and social structures in which families form and live. We invite you to read these pages with your heart as well as your head.

DEFINING FAMILY

Before we explore the family as a system and the central role of communication in creating and enacting family relationships, we must

define what a family is. To start, think about what *family* means to you. Take a minute to write down your own definition of a family.

If you share your definition of a family with others, you will see that your definition likely has some parts in common with others and it may be different in important ways. For example, would your definition include a person who is not a blood or legal relative, like Lacy's "aunt" Belle in the second case study? Would you consider partners who are cohabiting and unmarried as a family? If you had an LGBTQIA+ sibling, would you consider their partner or child as family to you? Are married couples without children a family? If a parent and stepparent divorce, are the stepsiblings still family? Would you include a beloved pet as family? How, if at all, has your definitions of family changed over the years? In the end, defining who is and is not family will involve some very important choices in your life.

In short, no single definition of the term "family" exists. We might think about families as persons who have biological (blood, birth) and/or legal ties (such as marriage), but that would be quite limited for many families, for instance, a family formed around a cohabiting, unmarried couple, or best friends who regard and treat each other as family. Private and public debates regularly take place over what a family is and who should be included as family.

We often hear calls to return to some past form of "traditional" family values. When the first edition of this book was published in 1982, family historian Tamara Harevan expressed her concern over calls for one idealized family, arguing that U.S. society always has contained "great diversities in family types and family behavior."[2] Likewise, in her book, *The Way We Never Were*, family scholar Stephanie Coontz explained that an idealized view of the "American family," as one we need to return to, never existed in the first place (and the same can be said for many other cultures as well).[3]

We know that race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, geographic location, educational levels, and a variety of other factors influence different paths families take.[4] You might think that

defining family is one of those academic exercises scholars undertake, but honestly, defining family is very important as you and your family make important decisions based on who you believe should or should not be included. These are also practical policy-related decisions that arise from the definition of family, ranging from who can visit someone in the hospital to who can make financial and legal decisions. For example, after the September 11, 2001 destruction of New York's World Trade Center and other sites, there were difficult decisions to be made about who would be entitled to family/survivor benefits as questions about who is family were asked and answered.[5] Even your own questions about who should be invited to a family holiday or wedding celebration, or is entitled to a gift, forces you to decide who is and is not family.

What factors did you use to decide who is family in your definition? Perhaps you focused on biological or legal ties,[6] what families do and how they relate to each other, or on behaviors that help you and others feel like a family. Communication scholar Kory Floyd and colleagues offered three frames, or lenses, for crafting family definitions: (a) role lens, (b) socio-legal lens, and (c) biogenetic lens.[7] First, using a **role lens**, we consider people family when they perceive and act like family. The central characteristic of this definition is social behavior (what people do and say) and emotion (feeling like a family). Second, the **socio-legal lens** relies on laws and regulations to define family relationships. The central characteristic of this definition is being formally included or not by policy or law. Third, the **biogenetic lens** depends on the extent to which the relationship is directly or potentially reproductive and produces children, sharing genetic material.[8] These three approaches help us understand different factors involved when defining a family, as they represent how complex a task it is for scholars, practitioners, and individual family members alike to understand what a family is and who they regard as family.

PHOTO 1.1 *Two-parent biological families are one of many family forms.*

Maskot Collection/Getty

We take a broad, inclusive view of family that encompasses aspects of role, socio-legal, and biogenetic lenses. In the end, if the members consider themselves to be a family and function as a family system, we accept their self-definition of a family. Thus, our definition of **family** is *networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time, bound by ties of marriage, blood, law, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family, and who share a significant history and anticipated future of functioning as a family*.

We favor this definition as it encompasses a wide variety of different family forms, exists over time, and highlights that families are formed and enacted through communication. Although it is easy to envision how a happy, connected family meets this definition, it is also important to remember that a troubled or estranged family meet this definition as well.[9]

BOX 1.2 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. Write your own definition of a family. How is your definition similar to or different from the definition we offered in this book?
2. What family characteristics or types do you emphasize in your definition? What characteristics or types did you choose to leave out of your definition, if any? What would other family members emphasize or leave out of their definition?
3. Which four of the core beliefs about families are most similar and which four are the most different from your own family experience?

UNDERSTANDING FAMILY AS A SYSTEM

We provided you with a brief history of this book in the preface, and this is the 11th edition of this first-ever family communication textbook. The original authors started by adopting a focus on *two guiding principles*: the family as a system of interconnected relationships, and communication as the primary way families develop, create, maintain, and alter their identities. These two guiding principles remain our focus today.

Here in Chapter 1, we continue by focusing on the family as a system. Scholars across many disciplines adopted a systems perspective to understand life in groups, organizations, and societies, including families.[10] A systems perspective is what we call a meta-theory, as it focuses broadly on family experience. It might help to think about it this way: You may have a tabletop lamp in a room that helps you see well enough to read a

book or work on your laptop while sitting in a certain chair. However, to see what is going on in the whole room, you need more light, so you'll turn on a ceiling light to illuminate the entire space. This is what a meta-theory does, and it's what the family systems perspective does: It shines a light on the big picture to help us describe and explain what is going on. Communication serves as the centerpiece of the family system because relationships are formed, maintained, and changed through social interaction.[11]

In what follows, we examine seven characteristics of a family system: (a) wholeness, (b) interdependence, (c) self-regulating patterns, (d) interactive complexity and punctuation, (e) openness, (f) complex relationships, and (g) equifinality. As we discuss each one, think about your own family system today and see if you can identify the nature of these systems characteristics in your own family.

Wholeness

First, scholars base a family systems approach on the assumption that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. An individual family member's behavior becomes understandable only when viewed within the context of the family system and within the broader context in which the family is situated.[12] See a focus on the family system at play as a mother describes what happened when a daughter developed a serious illness:

> The whole family reflected the strain. My daughter Marcy and I fought more, while my husband tended to withdraw into himself, which brought me closer to my son … the three children became closer while our marriage became more distant.

From this example, taking a systems perspective, we focus on how changes in the daughter's health status affected all family members' interactions and relationships, for instance, how family members interacted differently and took on new responsibilities. Interestingly, the close

relationship between the siblings may have never developed without Marcy's illness and experiencing stress in the family system. In this way, the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts.

Interdependence

Second, within any system, the parts are **Interdependent** , meaning the parts form the whole, and a change in one part of the system will result in changes in the others. If a family member loses a job, wins a scholarship, marries, or joins the military, the entire family system is affected. For example, in the first case at the start of the chapter, the lives of Staci's daughters change each time their mother enters into a new romantic relationship.

Self-Regulating Patterns

Third, people communicate and coordinate their actions, creating **behavioral patterns** made up of different meanings and rules that serve to coordinate the family system and that make life somewhat to very predictable. Think about your own family rituals, such as a birthday celebration, bedtime ritual, or the way your family tends to approach conflict. You likely have patterns that you repeat; you know what to expect, and you understand what you are to do and say. Interaction patterns provide a way for family members to fully participate in the family system and provide the context for understanding and predicting what to do or say (the self-regulating part).

Communication rules concern which behaviors are expected or prohibited in a relationship. Rules may be negotiated explicitly and shared among the family, or they may be implicit, that is, unstated but understood to guide family actions. For example, your family likely has privacy rules about what can and cannot be shared with extended family, friends, and on social media. When the rules are implicit, you may not know the rule exists

until someone violates it. See Chapter 5 for more on rules and Chapter 3 on privacy rules in communication privacy management theory.

PHOTO 1.2 *Families are characterized frequently by activities that members share.*

ZouZou/Shutterstock

Family members seek stability and predictability in a process called **calibration**. Families maintain or alter rules in the family system through feedback. For instance, a parent may post a photo online of their now teenage son in the bathtub when he was a toddler, assuming the photo will be seen by family members. However, once the photo is tagged, the son's friends see the photo, and he is very embarrassed. Following this incident, the family will need to recalibrate and come to agreement over new rules for sharing family photos in public.[13]

Family systems use feedback to maintain and change their rules.[14] Whereas families use *maintenance feedback* to keep things consistent and minimize change, they also use *change-promoting feedback* to recalibrate

the system. Family systems are always undergoing feedback and enacting small and large processes of recalibration. For instance, a recently retired couple decided to share one car to save money. They quickly found out they needed a shared calendar to reduce or eliminate surprises when one of them would need to take the car.

Interactive Complexity and Punctuation

Fourth, in a family system, each action serves as both a response to a previous action and a stimulus for a future action. In one family, a divorced mother agreed her young adult son could move home after college graduation and look for a job. She was especially bothered whenever she saw him video gaming or watching sports. Now, six months past graduation, telling herself she wanted to be supportive, she texted him web links to job openings and asked him how his job search was going. Rather than supportive, the son saw the mother as overly involved and thought "Geez, I cannot get a minute to relax." He started coming home later and went directly to his room. As a result, mom sent even more links and taped notes to his door. The son saw his mother as pushy and controlling and asked his dad if he could move in with him. This is an example of *interactive complexity*, wherein each action in the system appears to be a response to a previous action, yet also triggers the next.

People attempt to make sense of interactive complexity by "punctuating" sequences of actions. **Punctuation** is an interruption in a sequence of behavior that gives actions meaning. When we punctuate, we determine for ourselves that "things started here." You can see how the mother and son in the last example understood and punctuated the sequence of actions differently. The mother would say she needed to intervene as the son was not working hard enough at the job search. The son would say he needed to pull away because his mother was interfering in his life.

Interactions, like sentences, are punctuated to create meaning. Confusion happens when people punctuate sequences differently and assign different meanings to actions, as this mother and son demonstrated in a classic nag–

withdraw cycle[15] (see Chapter 10 on the demand–withdraw pattern of conflict). In Figure 1.1, you can imagine the different interpretations that could emerge depending on how the cycle is punctuated.

Openness

Fifth, by their nature, human systems feature various degrees of openness to the influence of other people, organizations, and cultures (see more on family borders in Chapter 2). In some cases, the family system may close itself or maintain closedness and resist change. Other times, openness is encouraged or forced, such as when a family moves to a new culture or experiences a family crisis that requires the family to recalibrate to adjust to new expectations and rules.

Complex Relationships

Sixth, systems are embedded in larger systems and subsystems, creating an intricate set of structures and interaction patterns that may only be understood in relation to each other. Each family is embedded in a complex web of cultures, as well as religious, educational, and governmental systems, extended family systems, and subsystems within the family. Family systems reflect value systems and dynamics of power and privilege.

Coalitions develop when individuals align in joint action with or against others. For example, a newlywed may feel caught between a spouse and their mother.[16] Family triangulation is a type of coalition where members can easily become caught in the middle and/or excluded. One son and mother were extremely close when they were a single-parent family. When the mother remarried, they still wanted time together for just the two of them. The stepdad, Frank, expected to be included in these outings. The son described, “My mom and I would meet for lunch at our favorite restaurant, and I would see Frank driving by the restaurant repeatedly. Mom and Frank would then have a big fight when we came home.”

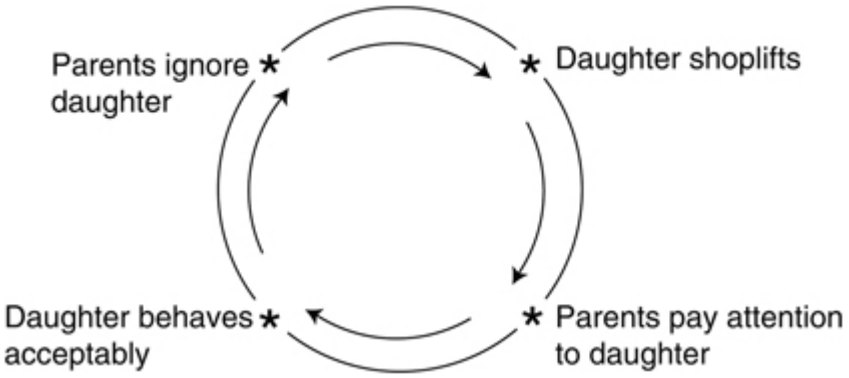


FIGURE 1.1 Circular causality within a family system.

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Triangles can result in frustration and conflict if poorly managed, and members find themselves caught in the middle with the others.[17] In the following "Family Matters," we read about one communication scholar's attempt to help us understand triangulation in negotiating the complexity within the system of in-law relationships.

BOX 1.3 FAMILY MATTERS: FAMILY TRIANGLES WITH IN-LAWS

We are not surprised to see that the relationship between a married person, their spouse, and the spouse's parents (in-laws) can sometimes be a family subsystem that is difficult to manage. Different members of this triad or triangle can easily become caught in the middle between the others, especially in the early years of the couple's marriage. One challenging issue is to understand what information to reveal to the others, and choices about what to disclose can affect the satisfaction of all involved in this triadic relationship. To investigate this further, communication researcher Mary Claire Morr Serewicz

developed a series of propositions and hypotheses that she tested by having 98 in-law triads (a couple and one of the in-laws) complete a survey. The couples had been married between 8 and 23 months; 86% of the in-laws were mothers-in-law, and 70% of the spouses were daughters-in-law.

As we might expect, relationship satisfaction was strongest in the marital dyad, and weakest in the dyad with the spouse and the in-law. Morr Serewicz found that disclosures from the in-law to the new spouse were associated with the relational quality of both the marital couple and the new spouse with the in-law. The parent was most satisfied with the relationship with the new spouse when they were able to disclose historical information about family identity, relational trouble, and acceptance. For the spouse, satisfaction with the marital partner and with the in-law relationship increased when they received disclosures as well. Not surprisingly, disclosure from the in-law about acceptance increased relational satisfaction, but satisfaction increased for the spouse even when receiving more negative disclosure from the in-law as well. Perhaps this can be explained by understanding how receiving disclosure signals that the spouse is considered to be part of the family. Of course, Morr Serewicz acknowledged that the gendered nature of the sample (i.e., largely daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law) may have influenced the findings. Nevertheless, by illuminating the complexity of in-law triads and the key role of disclosure and communication in helping these relationships develop in functional ways, her research demonstrates that a system's approach to triangulation in family relationships matters.

For further reading, see Morr Serewicz, M. C. (2008). Toward a triangular theory of the communication and relationships of in-laws: Theoretical proposal and social relations analysis of relational satisfaction and private disclosure in in-law triads. *Journal of Family Communication*, *8*(4), 264–292.

Equifinality

Seventh, one of the most intriguing characteristics of family systems is **equifinality**, which means that there are often multiple paths to arrive at the same place.[18] One research team studied how stepfamilies develop over time. Some stepfamilies feel like a family almost from the beginning, whereas other stepfamilies experience a series of ups and downs before they feel like a family.[19] Both stepfamilies eventually felt like a family in the end; they just got there in different ways. The flipside of equifinality is that even if we try and do things the same way, different outcomes may result. Even if a stepfamily tried to do things like another stepfamily they saw as healthy and successful, they may end up in different places. The good news is there is some freedom in equifinality as each family will work out how to be a family, rather than pressuring themselves to do everything one correct way.

Taking a systems perspective and understanding the different characteristics of family systems helps us see the central role of communication over time as families interact and navigate through expected and unexpected changes and challenges. Although we find a system perspective very useful, this broad, “light on the ceiling” perspective does have some limitations. First, like other meta-theories, a systems perspective does not include specific propositions about what a system is or should be. However, from what we just discussed, this is also a strength as it does not limit or prescribe specific choices and actions, giving the family both the freedom and flexibility to create their own functional patterns.[20] Second, because a systems perspective focuses on interdependence of the family, at times we may overlook or ignore individual behavior, such as mental illness,[21] or cultural systems that prevent equality.[22]

Thus far in Chapter 1, we have discussed our core principles, defined family, and highlighted a systems perspective on the family. We will finish this chapter by undertaking a broad discussion of the state of the contemporary family.

BOX 1.4 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. Why does a systems perspective focus on family wholeness and interdependence, rather than on the perspective of individuals in the family?
2. What do you learn about your own family when you intentionally take a systems perspective on what the family experiences?
3. What important coalitions and subsystems exist in your family system? How do these coalitions and subsystems affect communication in the family?

DIVERSITY OF THE CONTEMPORARY FAMILY

One clear hallmark of modern families is that they are complex and varied. Even our own authorship team represents this principle:

- *Dawn O. Braithwaite* came from a closed adoption in urban Chicago, and she recently had a DNA analysis to learn more about her background. After her adoptive mother died, the family became a stepfamily. Dawn and her childless-by-choice husband recently retired to live near her stepmother and several close voluntary family relationships.
- *Paul Schrodt* was born and raised near Dallas. After his parents divorced, his family became a stepfamily, and he grew up as the oldest of six siblings, including two biological siblings, a stepbrother, a half-

sister, and an adopted sister from Russia. He is married and the father of two sons who are now college students.

- *Colleen Warner* grew up in Ohio with two older brothers and her biological parents. She has two children (a tween and a teen) who entered her family through domestic infant adoption. She shares custody of her children with her ex-husband. Both children are in open adoptions, which means the adoptive family knows and is in contact with the biological families.
- *Kathleen M. Galvin* grew up in New York City as an only child of Irish immigrants. After her parents died, she became part of an adoptive Norwegian-German family with three siblings. Kathleen and her husband raised three now-adult children, one of whom was adopted from Korea, and became grandparents of four. Kathleen passed away in 2022.

What about you? What different family forms and configurations do you represent? No one-size-fits-all family pattern exists, and there is no way we can describe all possible families. Thus, our goal is to introduce different family types and demographics in play as we explore (a) diversity in the contemporary family, (b) coupling in the contemporary family, (c) parenting in the contemporary family, and (d) generations in the contemporary family.

First, we briefly describe *U.S. American racial/ethnic population trends*. There is no way to describe all the trends and data sources here. We provide a brief snapshot of major trends in the racial/ethnic makeup gleaned from the most recent 2020 U.S. Census, which tracked changes from 2010–2020.[23] These data are instructive as long as we understand that some groups are likely underreported for a variety of reasons, from access to data collections to language issues and fear. We encourage you to keep current on the distribution of populations across the United States and outside of the United States.

- The largest population increase is the percentage of people reporting as multiracial, rising from 9 million to 33.8 million; a 276% increase and

the largest increase across all different groups. For example, those who indicated they were White in combination with other groups rose by 31.6%, and Black with another combination rose by 88.7%.

- The White population remained the largest group in the United States, with 235.4 million reporting as White alone (down by 8.6% in 2010), or White combined with another group (71% of the total population) down from 72.4% in 2010.
- The Latinx or Hispanic population increased 23% to 62.1 million (18.7% of the total population). They represented more than half (51.1%) of the total U.S. population growth over the ten-year period.
- The Black or African American population totaled 41.1 million (12.4% of the total population); up from 38.9 million (12.6%) in 2010.
- The Asian population represented 24 million (7.2% of the total population); up from 14.7 million people (4.8%) in 2010.
- The American Indian and Alaska Native population rose to 3.7 million (1.1% of the total population), increasing by 160%.
- The Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone population rose to 1.6 million (.5% of the total population), growing by 27.8%.

Second, we highlight some of the many ways families are co-created and enacted. There are so many variations on different family systems and trends, that it is not surprising that what is a family and who should be regarded as family is contested. If nothing else, we can say with confidence that the variety of U.S. American family systems has expanded. Another challenge is that the bulk of the research still focuses on a limited number of family forms (especially marital, white, heterosexual families). As we mentioned earlier, we know that national databases undercount different family systems or fail to count them at all.

Applying a family system lens serves as a continual reminder that families represent a great variety of forms and motivations for people to identify as part of a particular type of family, or in any family at all. For example, the opportunities for couples to be childless by choice or in LGBTQIA+ families were not accepted in much of the culture that long ago

(and would still not be universally today). This is important to understand, as what is, or what some believe should or should not be considered as family, is continually in flux and often contested. This is significant when we comprehend that there is no longer one majority family form in the United States.[24] In the following "Family Portrait," Dr. Megan E. Cardwell discusses her research on race and identity and growing up in a Black-White multiracial family.

BOX 1.5 FAMILY PORTRAIT: DR. MEGAN E. CARDWELL, VILLANOVA UNIVERSITY

Dr. Cardwell's website here: https://www1.villanova.edu/university/liberal-arts-sciences/programs/communication/faculty/biodetail.html?mail=megan.cardwell@villanova.edu&xsl=bio_long

What drew you to study family communication?

Although I am interested in many topics across the communication studies discipline, my draw to family communication lies in its centrality to identity. Our families are one of our primary socializing agents. They are often the first people we are exposed to and teach us lasting lessons about who we are.

What are your main areas of family scholarship?

I study race and identity and its connection to family, particularly in interracial and multiracial families. My interests lie at the crossroads of interpersonal and intergroup communication processes, and how these processes come together and impact shared family identity in families that do not share the same ethnic-racial identity.

How has your own family influenced what you teach and study?

As a child in a Black-White multiracial family, I was always interested in how my siblings embraced, enacted, and shifted our ethnic-racial identities differently, despite having the same genetic makeup. Although the master narrative surrounding families are sites of similarity and shared identity, they are often sites of intergroup communication and intercultural learning. My own family taught me that under the surface of false sameness that cloaks a family, there is a richness of identity and difference.

How can family communication students use your research in their own family life?

My research may help students recognize taken for granted aspects of family as they consider what makes a family. Is it their shared family resemblance, their shared cultural identity, or the similar way they experience the world having come from similar contexts, often living in the same house? What defines a family that does not share many of these taken for granted family assumptions, such as multi-ethnic-racial, interfaith, or transracially adopted families? And most importantly, how do these families use communication processes to construct a shared family identity when taken for granted family norms are absent?

Different family systems are not always amenable to simple categorization, and some family systems reflect more than one variation (e.g., a family may be LGBTQIA+, Asian, immigrant, and commuting all at once). Just like there are different family types, these types are interrelated in essential ways. **Intersectionality** focuses on the connection between race, class, gender/sex on identity, social class, power, and oppression.[25] Communication scholar Robin Boylorn explained that the intersectional nature of families encourages us to consider how the "individual and social groups within intersecting power relations shapes their experiences within and perspective on their social world."[26] Social problems can only be addressed by making the efforts to understand and take meaningful action on international, national, and local levels.[27]

One additional challenge we faced was how to best organize our discussion of different family systems in limited space and to best represent unique aspects and commonalities they share. For example, do we divide out different types of couples from parenting, for example, by discussing LGBTQIA+ and heterosexual parents separately? In the end, we tried to keep you as a reader in mind in all our choices.

We start by distinguishing between two types of family experiences: the current family(ies) in which you live, and your family of origin, both of which influence your view and experiences of family. Family of origin refers to the family, or families, in which one grows up. Although some of us grew up in a single family of origin, it is important to note that many of us have had multiple family experiences growing up, as we trust the preceding description of your authors highlights (see Chapter 2 for more on family of origin).

BOX 1.6 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What ethnic and racial demographics of contemporary U.S. families did you expect to see? Which ones surprised you?
2. How does taking an intersectional lens on your family help you understand some of your family strengths and challenges? How might an intersectional approach help you understand a family that is very different from your own?

COUPLING AND THE CONTEMPORARY FAMILY

Married Partners

The profile of marriage and family continues to change. Americans are less likely to marry than in previous decades. For example, in 1970, 67% of adults lived with a spouse and/or children, yet in 2023, that number has dwindled to 37%.[28] At present, 38% of U.S. adults have never been married, which is at a historic high, up from 29% in 1990.[29] Currently, about 53% of American adults are married, compared to 58% in 1995. Over the same period, the share of adults who are living with an unmarried partner has risen from 3% to 7%.[30]

First marriages are taking place later in life. In 2019, the average age at first marriage reached its highest point ever: 29.9 years old for men and 28 years old for women.[31] Although people are getting married later and having children later than in the past, 69% of young adults who have not yet been married report that they desire to be married in the future.[32]

The divorce rate has been slowly declining and has stabilized over the past decade. About 50% of first marriages ended in divorce in 2011, however, about 70% of people who were married in the 1990s are still married. The current rate is 2.3 divorces per 1,000 people, compared to 4.0 per 1,000 people in 2001.[33] In the most recent data we located, first

marriages that end in divorce lasted a median of eight years, and separation tended to occur around the seventh year.[34]

Cohabiting Partners

Cohabitation among couples continues to grow, both living together before marriage and/or in place of getting married at all.[35] There is now greater acceptance of cohabiting households, along with single parent, stepfamily, and other family forms. Since the 1960s, couples have had access to different birth control and family planning options (and these are at present undergoing challenges at state and federal levels). Couples have also experienced different economic implications that may delay marriage, for example, needing to wait to purchase a house. Couples are also waiting longer to marry, hoping to avoid divorce, and will marry later, if at all.[36]

Views on marriage and cohabitation can be linked to religious affiliation. For example, half of persons who identify as religiously affiliated believe that society is better off if couples get married and marry for the long-term, whereas 31% of those not religiously affiliated hold this belief.[37]

Partners Without Children

The number of partners (married or cohabiting) not becoming parents, either as childless by choice or from experiencing infertility, is increasing. Not all married or cohabiting couples become parents, yet most have children in their lives, such as nieces and nephews, younger siblings, or children from a previous partner. Between 1982 and 2002, the percentages of childless-by-choice women 33 to 44 years old grew from 5% to 7%.[38] Communication scholar Wes Durham studied how and why couples who chose not to have children negotiated this decision when they agreed or when one person had the goal of persuading the other, even to the point of refusal to procreate.[39]

Communication scholar Julia Moore studied women who had declared themselves to be childless by choice and ended up becoming mothers

because they changed their minds or otherwise became pregnant. When these women announced they were becoming mothers, they often received responses that were troubling to them and faced decisions on what to tell their children who later might hear their previous news.[40] There is little research on men who choose to be childless, although men have more years to make this decision given their long fertility.[41]

Single People

You may be surprised to see a section on single people in a book on family communication. Of course, single adults are family members themselves and scholars who study being single are actively *exploring the reasons people choose to be single, many quite happily so*.[42] Scholar Bella DePaulo has studied the choice to remain single and remains a public advocate for dispelling the myths and addressing the stigma attached to the decision. Although data are hard to come by, researchers project that 25% of current young adults will likely be single (for a variety of reasons) when they turn 50.[43]

DePaulo debunks the myth that all adults are healthier and more satisfied if married, which encourages people to believe that everyone is waiting to get married rather than living a satisfied single life. Although some single people desire to marry, and some will do so, DePaulo highlighted research differentiating between being alone and lonely. She pointed out, "As the potential for living a full and meaningful single life becomes more widely known, living single will become more of a genuine choice. And when living single is a real choice, then getting married will be, too."[44] Many, though not all, single people have close relationships with their family of origin, and many form strong voluntary family relationships.

Voluntary/Chosen Family

Voluntary family represents *two or more persons who regard each other as family and share a commitment to the relationship over time but are not*

related by biology or law.[45] With marriage rates declining, people marrying later in life (if at all), and diminishing stigmas against living single, more people are choosing voluntary family ties to meet their needs in life. These chosen (intentional or fictive) family relationships are found across many different cultures and within U.S. cultural and ethnic groups. People often use family-like language to describe voluntary kin, such as "He is like a brother to me" or "I am the kids' grandfriend."

Communication researchers have described four different voluntary kin types, the most common being those who supplemented family of origin either because they were not close or the voluntary kin shared experiences or values more fully, as is the case for many LGBTQIA+ people.[46] Some people with voluntary family have a close relationship with both their voluntary and their family of origin, having different needs met by each family type. Others prefer to keep the voluntary and family of origin separate, especially if the family of origin might find the voluntary family threatening to their identity.[47]

Polyamorous Relationships

Those who have multiple consensual sexual, emotional, or romantic relationships with more than one partner are labeled as a polyamorous relationship.[48] These relationships may reside inside and outside of marriage, may be either same-sex or opposite-sex relationships, and may or may not be monogamous. Polyamorous relationships experience greater stigma and relatively little is known about these relationships. People in monogamous relationships appear to report higher levels of commitment, communication, and overall satisfaction, whereas those in non-monogamous polyamorous relationships report a greater emphasis on the sexual aspects of the relationship.[49]

Dual-Career Partnerships and Parents

A challenge for coupled households involves *how partners navigate single and dual-career relationships*. In 2015, 60% of partnered adults without children or with children under age 18 were in dual-income households.[50] The percentage of women serving as the primary wage earners in single-parent and married households grew to 42%.[51] The vast majority of Black mothers contribute significantly to their family income, with only 14.6% of these mothers bringing home less than one-quarter of their family's earnings.[52]

Although dual-career families have the economic advantage of two salaries, they have their own unique economic and logistical challenges as well, for example, covering care for children while parents are working. Affordable, high-quality childcare positively affects employment and lowers rates of poverty.[53] Compared to other high GDP industrialized nations, U.S. federal and state governments contribute only a tiny fraction of childcare costs, if any.[54] Since 2010, 30% of preschool-age children were regularly cared for by grandparents, and 12% by a sibling or other relative, which eliminated or saved on childcare expenses.[55]

Managing work–life issues are a major consideration for couples, and working parents especially, as almost half of parents believe they spend too little time with their children. As a result, many young children spend only a few hours a day or less with their working parent(s).[56] Some dual-earner couples with children are working opposite shift schedules for economic or personal reasons, to increase their finances (especially to cover childcare), or to have more time to spend with their children. One implication of couples working opposite shifts is that this leaves little couple time, especially through midlife.[57]

Repartnering

The majority of people who divorce eventually form new romantic partnerships, either through remarriage or cohabitation. Just over 40% of marriages in 2015 were remarriages for at least one person. The remarriage

rate is higher for men than for women.[58] Childless divorced women under 30 years old are more likely to remarry, followed by divorced women under age 30 with children. Older women are the least likely to remarry.

Multiple remarriages are becoming more common with remarriages being slightly less stable than first marriages.[59] Approximately 50% of people who divorce remarry within four years. About one in five men and women ages 50–69 have remarried twice.[60] Most people do make good adjustments following divorce, depending on life stage, parenting status, and finances. Divorce after 50 years old (called "gray divorce") has risen dramatically, and these divorces now account for 25% of all divorces.[61]

Non-Human Family

One last category represents *a growing increase in non-human family* membership.[62] Those who regard pets as family establish a psychological bond and mutual relationship with their pets.[63] Of the 62% of people who own pets, 97% regard their pets as family, and this number does not change by sex or ethnicity.[64] People who are unmarried or do not have children at home are more likely to regard pets as family. It is also common for romantically involved adults to choose to care for pets together before raising children.

BOX 1.7 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What types of family coupling best describes what you think would be ideal for your own life and family?
2. What might you gain, and perhaps miss out on, given the family coupling type you identified?

3. What role has voluntary family played in your life up until now? What do you envision for your future?

PARENTING AND THE CONTEMPORARY FAMILY

Two-Parent Family

Two-parent families are created around parents caring for and raising children. Some of these families, both heterosexual and LGBTQIA+, have biological children from one or both of the parental partners, and other two-parent families are formed via adoption, remarriage, fostering, guardianship, or a combination. The majority of parents are married, although as we have already discussed, the overall marriage rate is declining, and many are choosing to cohabit and/or parent outside of marriage. Some of these parents will marry at some point, often after the birth of children, and others will continue to cohabit and not marry, or otherwise co-parent.

The U.S. birth rate reached a record low in 2016, capping a fairly steady decline since 2007. Looking at overall births per woman, the birth rate is on a steady decline to an average of 1.6 births in 2020.[65] Thanks in part to advances in fertility technology, the birth rate for women over 30 increased slightly between 2015 and 2016.[66] Between 2018–2020, most of the births were to women ages 20–29, and a close second were women between ages 30–39.[67] As the large baby boomer cohort aged and fertility rates have declined, the percentage of families with their own child living at home decreased to 40% in 2020,[68] and households are getting smaller. At present, the average American household includes 2.5 people, a decline from 3.3 people in 1960.[69] This figure represents the increase in the number of women who are voluntary childless or experiencing infertility, for some due to trying to become pregnant at a later age.[70]

LGBTQIA+ Families

Researchers cite data that *the number of LGBTQIA+ couples and families are increasing*, with 17% of U.S. Americans under 30 years old reporting as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, 8% for those 30–49 years, 5% of those 50–64 years, and 2% of those over 65 years.[71] Committed couples who are LGBTQIA+ are increasingly more visible, due in part to a greater ability and willingness of same-sex partners to live openly, as well as to the increase in marriage, which became legal in the United States in 2015. In addition, same-sex parenting, which makes partnered or marital status more visible, increased; in 2021, 58% of partners were married and 79.5% included children.[72] Not only do these households include biological children and/or stepchildren, same-sex couple households also included more adopted and foster children.[73] Although same-sex parenting is more accepted than in the past, half the adoptive parents who are gay or lesbian reported discrimination from birth parents or child welfare workers, and cultural controversy over LGBTQIA+ adoption persists.[74]

Researchers report that 1.6% of adults in the United States are either *nonbinary or transgender, meaning their gender is not the same sex they were assigned at birth*.[75] In young adults, the number rises to 5% saying their gender differs from what was assigned at birth. About 10% of the population in the United States reports a transgender family member.[76] Despite increases, nonbinary or transgender individuals face misunderstanding and discrimination on several fronts, along with legal challenges to their status.

Parenting via Scientific Technologies

The number of babies born through reproduction technologies across the globe is increasing, reaching a total of 5 million since 1978.[77] More than 73,000 babies were born from assisted reproductive technology cycles in 2020.[78] Although the number is relatively small, an increasing number of individuals and couples, including LGBTQIA+ persons, are achieving

parenthood through assistive measures. One in six couples worldwide experience some form of fertility problem at least once during their lifetimes.[79] Although success rates remain low with high expense for infertility treatments, such as in-vitro fertilization, scientific advances are making this possibility more viable.[80] Tens of thousands of hopeful parents undergo infertility treatment annually in the United States.[81] An increasing number are working with a surrogate who carries the baby to term.

Stepfamilies

A stepfamily is formed by merging existing family units through cohabitation or marriage. A stepfamily consists of two adults and children, not all of whom are from the adults' union. In some stepfamilies, only one of the partners brings children from a previous family. The adults may or may not add additional children to the stepfamily through birth or adoption.[82]

Stepfamilies continue to increase both through remarriage and cohabitation. Exact figures are difficult to come by because of variations in custodial arrangements. The Stepfamily Foundation estimated that 50% of U.S. families are recoupled or remarried.[83] More than 40% of American adults have at least one step-relative in their family.[84] Roughly 52% of adults under 30 years old have a step-relation. Many stepfamily members find themselves part of one or more stepfamilies in childhood or in adulthood if one or both parents have multiple marital or cohabiting partnerships. Stepfamilies' members face challenges bringing the family together and developing the most functional family system and interacting in ways to that foster healthy roles, especially for stepparents, who often receive mixed advice on whether to parent or undertake a friendship role.[85]

Co-Parenting

When two parents end their relationship through separation or divorce, they must negotiate new roles and expectations to function as co-parents. In the

past, one of the parents, often the mother, served as the custodial parent and had the main responsibility of raising the children, whereas the other parent was nonresidential. Today, more co-parents share equal custody, negotiating where the children will reside and how the parents will divide the economic and daily responsibilities for caring for children. This often requires recalibrating rules and expectations for interaction and working together through change-promoting feedback.[86]

Adoptive Family

Constructing family systems through adoption is a centuries-old *practice of bringing in a child from outside the family system, not through birth*. Families looking to adopt may attempt to match personal characteristics, or an increasing number of adoptions are transnational and/or transracial and may involve adopting older children or children with disabilities. An increasing number of adoptions are by LGBTQIA+ parents, although at this time, some U.S. states or religious communities are actively debating laws to discourage or prevent these adoptions.

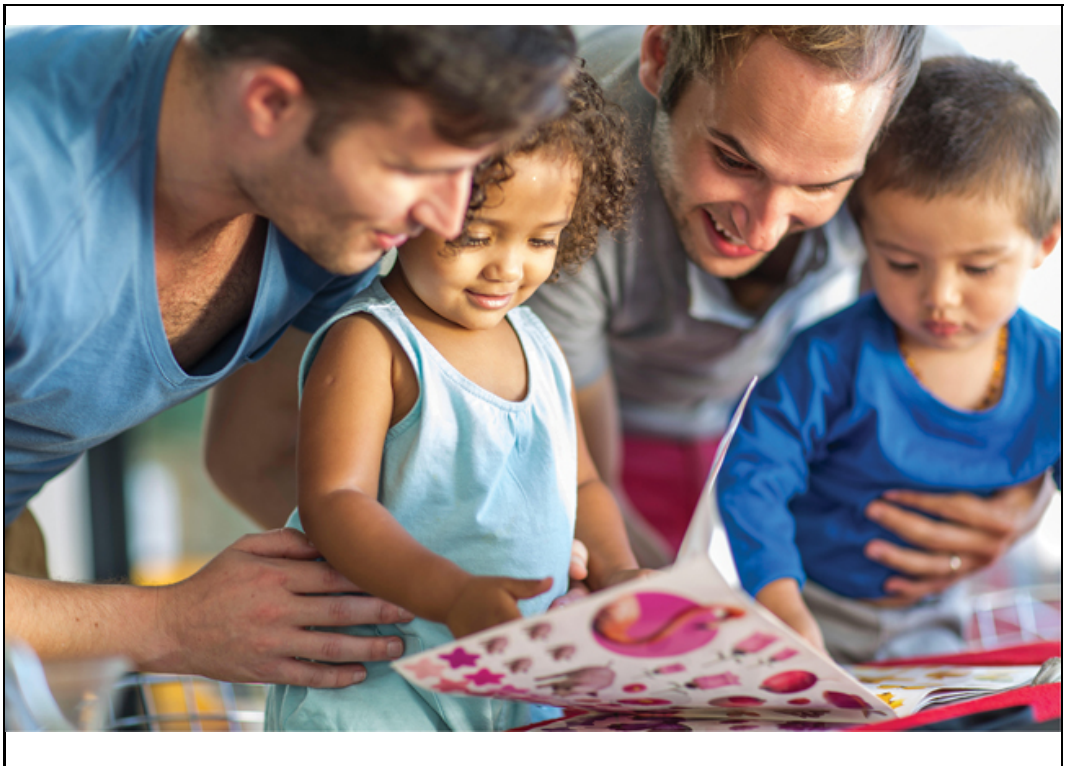


PHOTO 1.3 *Increasingly, single men and women or LGBTQIA+ partners are having or adopting children.*

Westend61GmbH/Alamy Stock Photo

Whereas earlier adoptions were closed systems in which the identity of birth parents was sealed, at present, almost all U.S. domestic adoptions are open, which encourage connections between birth mothers and adoptive parents. These adoptions create new types of extended families with communication opportunities and challenges. There is also an increase in domestic adoptions of children from the foster care system. At present, 40% of adopted children living in the United States are of a different race than one or more of their adoptive parents.[87]

Foster Families

Foster care provides temporary alternative families for an increasing number of children. Children within the foster care system have seen a steady increase since 2012.[88] In the best of situations, foster parents provide a substitute family experience until such time as children can return to biological relatives, are adopted by another family, enter a group home, or age out of the system. Almost half of foster children live in a non-relative foster family, and 34% live with a relative.[89] According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, approximately 50% of children exit foster care each year, often without adequate preparation. There are serious concerns about the experiences of many children in the foster care system. Older foster children confront significant challenges as they try to establish an adult identity and a supportive community.

Commuting Families

Commuting couples and families are those who have long-distance relationships, sometimes referred to as a commuter marriage. Some of these couples experience short-term commuting by one partner, usually the

male, who travels for work for careers such as sales, farming, or long-haul truck driving. Leavers may work away from home over longer spans of time, for example, military members or immigrants who come to another country to work to support their family back home. Bringing these families back together can be particularly challenging, especially for military families who have faced deployment of one or both parents. Although commuter marriages have traditionally seen men as leavers, an increasing number of women are the leavers. For example, women account for 14% of military members and 16% of officers.[90] Women who are leavers, especially those with children at home, often face disapproval or confusion about their family status and may immigrate for work.

Families in Poverty

Negative impacts from poverty are increasing for U.S. families. Children replaced seniors as the poorest segment of the population, comprising 34% of all people in poverty; 45% of children live in low-income families, and 22% live in poor families.[91] Families are more likely to experience poverty if they are African American, Latinx, or Native American. Certain pressures, such as unemployment and poverty, can disproportionately plague higher percentages of these groups, which discourages or erodes marriages and further confounds economic well-being and daily life.[92] For instance, young adolescents not living with two parents are less likely to move up to a high-income group in adulthood.[93]

Homelessness is increasing for families with children. More than 1.6 million (1 in 45) children under the age of 18 were homeless in the United States during 2010.[94] At present, 49% of adults cite lack of affordable housing as a serious problem, and this number has increased 10% since 2018, with Black and Latinx adults more likely to cite this concern.[95] Although many poor families contain two parents, about one quarter of single-parent families report incomes below the poverty level.[96] Economic pressures add significant stress to a family system, which affects the ways family members relate to each other and how they interact outside the

family. For example, about 12% of homeless children are not enrolled in school, and up to 45% do not attend school regularly.[97] Likewise, homeless people are three to six times more likely to become ill than those who are not homeless.[98]

Single-Parent Family

Also called a solo parent, these families consist of one parent and one or more children. Single-parent families may come from losing a partner through divorce or death, a single parent who formed their family through adoption, foster parenting, or conception via technological assistance. For some children, life in a single-parent system is temporary; however, many children will live in a one-parent family throughout their childhood. The number of single-parent family systems is increasing with 52.3% of first U.S. births by unmarried women.[99] In terms of ethnicity, in 2019, 64% of Black children, 42% of Latinx children, 24% of White children, and 15% of Asian children lived in single-parent homes.[100] Presently, 80% of single-parent families are headed by a single mother, and nearly a third of these families face economic challenges and live in poverty.[101] Parents with higher levels of education and finances are increasingly choosing life as a single parent.

PHOTO 1.4 *The stress of poverty increases family tensions.*

OlegD/Shutterstock

BOX 1.8 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. Which of the models of parenting are most similar and different from your own family experience?
2. How did the parenting model(s) you experienced shape you as a person and family member?
3. What would be reasons you would or would not choose to include children in your adult family and life?

GENERATIONS AND THE CONTEMPORARY FAMILY

Multigenerational family systems are groups of relations living in the same household, within a close geographic area, or linking two or more family systems, such as grandparents who live with a parent–child system or who take on parenting roles for grandchildren. Given increasing longevity, more families will include four and five generations of relatives who may maintain active contact. Multigenerational households continue to increase, about four times higher than in the 1970s, with 59.7 million Americans living in a multigenerational household in 2019, up by 1.3 million.[102] The majority of Americans with children who live with extended family members are either not married (46%) or are divorced, separated, or widowed (19%). Families from underrepresented groups who have children are two times as likely to have grandparents living in the house as opposed to White families.[103]

As American families become more culturally diverse through immigration, the extended family has reemerged in importance.[104] Economic realities, along with cultural models of extended kinship and acceptance of voluntary kin, also account for these increases.[105] Author Shina Shayesteh argued against viewing multigenerational families as springing from problems: "I'd like to posit that multigenerational living isn't immigrant culture. It's human culture, and always has been."[106]

Adult Children Living at Home

An increasing number of adult children remain living with parents or are more likely to return after their initial departure. As reported in 2024, 52% of young adults live with their parents.[107] More young adults stayed or moved home during the coronavirus outbreak in 2020.[108] Among young adults who moved home during this time, 23% reported their college campus had closed, and 18% cited job loss. The pandemic aside, living with parents has increased, with young men more likely than young women to

live with their parents. Of the young adults who have moved in with their parents, 68% were White, 58% were Latinx, and 55% were Black.[109]

Whether residing in the parental home or not, the majority of adult children remain closely connected to their parents, and parents are regularly involved in their lives. For example, the 2024 data concerning young adults (18–34) demonstrate a high degree of parental involvement and communication in the lives of young adult children. Parents reported texting (73%) and talking on the phone (54%) at least weekly. In the preceding year, 59% of the parents helped their adult children financially, and 41% reported they provide emotional support.[110]

Elderly Family Members

Longer lifespans are influencing family systems. U.S. life expectancy is an average of 78.7 years for all races, with women living an average of five years longer than males.[111] Considering that most people marry for the first time before age 30, a continuous marriage might well be expected to last for 45 to 50 years or more. The number of married couples without children at home continues to rise, as people live longer and women bear fewer children.

With women having a longer life expectancy than men (two-thirds of persons who die at age 85 or older are female), widowhood remains an expected life event for the majority of older married women. Because of increased lifespans, more middle-aged persons (typically women) are taking on caregiver roles for elderly parents and grandparents (often called the "sandwich generation"). About 15.7 million adults care for a family member who has Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia, and this number is increasing.[112]

Grandparents play an increasingly significant role in the family households of many children, even when a parent is present. A total of 38% of grandparents provide childcare in families.[113] Increasing numbers of children are living in grandparent-headed households with or without a

parent. When children live in households without either of their parents, close to half live in a grandparent's household.

As we come to the end of this first chapter, we know we have not accounted for every type of family or the variety of strengths and challenges within any particular family type. Indeed, appreciating the diversity, strengths, and challenges of families will always be a moving target.

Our description of the U.S. American family might leave you wondering what is a functional or normal family – what some call the "new normal" family? Historically, most researchers and practitioners will be drawn to trying to understand the problems that are visible and create negative attention. However, more scholars have shifted their focus to the characteristics of well-functioning families. This, in part, explains our guiding principle of viewing the family as a system and focusing on the centrality of communication in defining, developing, and changing families. As you may imagine, from the previous description of data on the family, there is little agreement on what is a healthy, functional, or "normal" family.

Family scholar Froma Walsh suggested that we think about families in terms of "The New Normal"; that despite all the challenges facing families today, there are positives on which to focus:

> Yet most families are showing remarkable resilience, making the best of their situations and creatively reconfiguring family life. Constructing a variety of household and kinship arrangements, they are devising new relationship strategies to fit their aspirations and their challenges and inventing new models of human connectedness … weaving together meaningful elements of varied traditions to fit their lives and relationships.[114]

Although researchers will continue to study family problems, an intentional focus on family strengths[115] highlights the tremendous diversity of families that appear to be functional, even as they struggle with both predictable and unpredictable changes.[116] A recent call for a focus on

relationship flourishing reinforces this commitment to understanding well-functioning families that exhibit relationship strengths and navigate life stresses.[117]

The eight core beliefs we shared to start off this chapter will be a focus in the book as we address the wide variety of communication choices and behaviors in diverse family systems, shaping what it means to be a family.

BOX 1.9 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What role did multigenerational family play in your family system? What do you anticipate in your future and why?
2. If someone asked you "what is a normal family," what would you answer and why?

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we started with a core framework for understanding family communication and how we define a family and why. We followed with an exploration of the characteristics of a systems perspective on family communication and functioning. The remainder of the chapter featured an overview of the contemporary family in terms of its diversity, including family systems of coupling, parenting, and living in generations.

Key Words

Behavioral patterns

Biogenetic lens
Calibration
Coalitions
Communication rules
Equifinality
Family
Interdependent
Intersectionality
Punctuation
Relational culture
Role lens
Socio-legal lens

FLASHCARDS

made up of different meanings and rules that serve to coordinate the family system and that make life somewhat to very predictable

the extent to which the relationship is directly or potentially reproductive and produces children, sharing genetic material

a process where family members seek stability and predictability

develop when individuals align in joint action with or against others

concern which behaviors are expected or prohibited in a relationship

which means that there are often multiple paths to arrive at the same place

is networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time, bound by ties of marriage, blood, law, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family, and who share a significant history and anticipated future of functioning as a family.

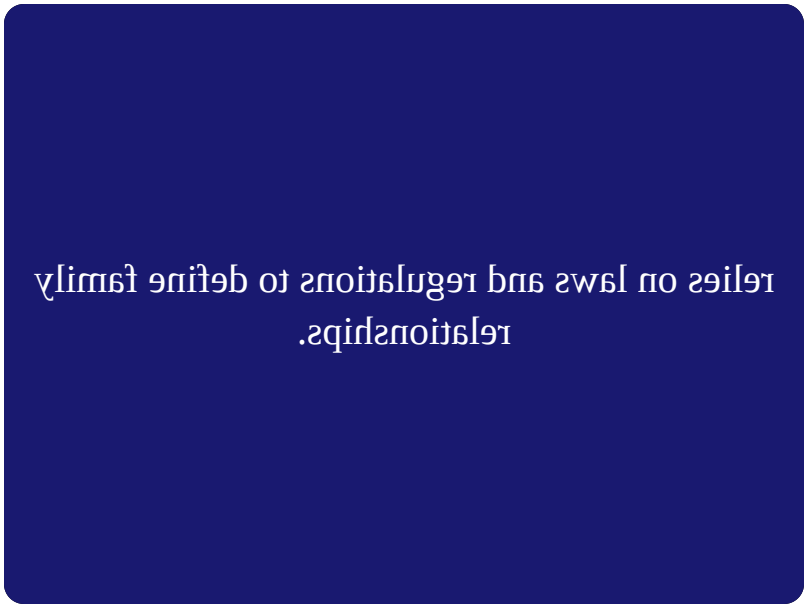
meaning the parts form the whole, and a change in one part of the system will result in changes in the others

focuses on the connection between race, class, gender/sex on identity, social class, power, and oppression

is an interruption in a sequence of behavior that gives actions meaning

which is a shared set of meanings, expectations, and rules for interaction that contributes to creating a family system

people are considered family when they perceive and act like family



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CHAPTER 2

What Is Family Communication?

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BOX 2.1

How do families communicate to create and change what it means to be a family? What are different ways we understand the role of communication in family systems? What characteristics influence how family systems function? What aspects of the family of origin are carried over across generations? In this chapter, we explore how communication functions in family communication and how family patterns and processes are created, maintained, and changed. After reading this chapter, you will be able to

1. Explain the transactional family communication process.
2. Identify how families are socially constructed in communication and are discourse-dependent.
3. Understand communication patterns that produce important family effects.

4. Articulate key family functions that shape, and are shaped by, family communication.
5. Express how our family system is influenced and transmitted from our family of origin.

DIFFERENCES IN WORLDVIEW

Bruce grew up in a household where he learned not to trust anyone who was not a member of the family because “There’s always somebody out to get you.” His grandfather, swindled twice by trusted business partners, taught his children to be wary of outsiders, a belief passed down to his son and eventually to his grandchildren. When Bruce finished high school, he joined the family business to keep the company in the family. At age 22, he met and married Melissa, a warm, friendly, and trusting person. Melissa grew up in a family surrounded by the warmth of adult friends and close neighbors; she made good friends in high school that she remained close to, even though Bruce did not like them. Unfortunately, their core worldview differences haunted their marriage. Bruce would say things like, “Take care of problems yourself,” and “You can only depend on your family.” Melissa kept thinking that Bruce would realize how narrow his perspective was. Despite their fundamental worldview differences, the couple created a good life – until the children arrived.

Bruce discouraged their children from forming close friendships and wanted them to only count on siblings and cousins to meet their needs for companionship. Bruce insisted that the children could not sleep over at friends’ houses, join organized sports, or loan their toys to anyone. Although Melissa tried to convince Bruce that he was overreacting, his position never changed. In fact, he became increasingly angry when she would seek out female friends at work or in the neighborhood or would spend time on social media. After years of struggling with her husband’s

lack of trust, his need for tight control, and trying to keep her and the children away from friends and participation in the larger world, Melissa chose to end their marriage.

INFLUENCES OF THE FATHER

Julio grew up in a family in which his father worked outside the home while his mother stayed home to raise Julio and his two younger sisters. Julio's father was in the insurance industry, and he was rarely around as he traveled often for work. Julio's father was also the disciplinarian in the family. Whenever Julio or his sisters were misbehaving, his mother would say things like, "You better stop it, or I will tell your father." The threat of having his father discipline him was often enough to make Julio shape up and behave. Julio's father tended toward bursts of anger and verbal attacks, using words like "dumb," "bad," "irresponsible," and "worthless." After such incidents, Julio's father would never apologize but seemed to go out of his way to be nicer toward him. Julio assumed his father loved him, even though he never said the words.

Later in life, Julio married Julie, and a few years later their first child, Alex, was born. Julio loved being a father. But as Alex entered the "terrible twos," he became a challenging child. Julio relied on what he had learned from his father about discipline, calling him a "bad boy" and taking away privileges. This caused a great deal of tension between Julio and Julie. Julie had been raised in a family where milder disciplinary tactics were used. Julie's parents were soft-spoken, patient people who doled out more love and empathy than punishment, which Julie preferred. These struggles continued until Alex was six, when Julie insisted they talk with a counselor because disagreements over discipline were affecting their marriage. During their counseling, Julio realized he had "become" his father – that he was recreating the unhealthy communication patterns in his relationship with Alex.

In its simplest form, we might think about family communication as the way family members send and receive messages. Sometimes, it is as simple as that – for instance, a parent might tell an adolescent, “Be home by 10 p.m. on a school night.” A mother-in-law might tell their son and Japanese daughter-in-law, “I want you two to speak English when you are at my house.” At first glance, these messages seem straightforward. If family communication was just about sending and receiving messages, we would not need a whole book about the topic.

Consider these examples again. Although the parent expects the adolescent to be home by 10 p.m., the child may say that sitting in the car in the driveway is sufficient. Similarly, the adolescent may argue they are old enough to choose their own curfew. The daughter-in-law may understand the expectation to speak English when with her husband’s family, but she is resentful that the mother-in-law does not consider how stressful it is for her to speak English or has never asked why they sometimes speak to one another in Japanese. In both examples, it is clear communication involves more than transmitting messages from one person to another, right?

Members of family systems can easily become caught up in predictable, and often unexamined, communication patterns that are influenced, at least in part, through their cultures, past experiences, and past interactions. As you will recall from Chapter 1, we view the family as *a system shaped in communication processes and patterns that both create and reflect family relationships*. Most of us tend to go through time not thinking much about our family communication. You may not have been very aware of your own family socialization and communication patterns until you observed or became part of other families.

To better understand the family as an interactive system, in this chapter we focus on family communication itself. First, we overview communication as a process. Second, we focus on perspectives of communication that privilege the social construction of family relationships. Third, we focus on communication patterns and family effects. Fourth, we introduce some supporting functions shaping family

communication. Finally, we conclude by discussing ways the family of origin influences family systems.

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Families are created and defined primarily through their interaction patterns, rather than through their structures.[1] Family systems are created, live their lives, and are changed as family members interact and co-create their individual and collective social reality.[2] From this perspective, communication takes center stage in shaping all aspects of individual and family identity.

In its broadest sense, we define **communication** as a symbolic, transactional process of creating and sharing meanings.[3] Understanding communication as *symbolic* implies that people use words, images, and behaviors to create meanings. *Symbols* represent objects, thoughts, or feelings we use to form shared *meanings*. We use symbols to express thoughts and feelings, such as (a) written and oral language; (b) nonverbal cues, including facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, movement, posture, appearance, spatial distance, and time; and (c) objects and images, such as photos, rings, videos, clothing, and cars. Family members may express their thoughts and feelings through hugs, gifts, teasing, shouting, rolling eyes, wearing special clothing, returning an engagement ring, or silence. Each of these symbols must be mutually understood to create shared meaning. Problems result when family members do not understand or agree on the meaning of a certain term or idea. For example, an engaged couple quickly found they had very different understandings for what it means to have a “large family” (three children for one partner and seven for the other) or what it means to “eat healthy” at the holidays.

Communication as Transaction

This perspective on communication means that we understand communication as *transaction*, in that we are simultaneously sending and receiving messages, and continually adapting to the context and people with whom we interact.[4] To follow, we discuss five characteristics of a transactional communication perspective.

First, a transactional communication perspective *focuses on relationships between family members*, rather than on individuals. The joint actions of family contribute to the development of unique relationships and family systems. For example, siblings may create nicknames that allow them to feel connected, but no one else can use those nicknames without highlighting they are an outsider to that relationship. We see the centrality of communication in family systems as they continually use symbols and create shared meanings within their relationships. Sometimes family members come to share meanings, and other times, they do not, which can result in misunderstanding. A grandfather might use joking sarcasm with grandchildren, for instance, say in a growling tone, "get over here you dumb kids." Whereas the grandchildren may find this funny and endearing, a new family member might easily interpret what grandfather said as mean and punishing. It is important to frame and understand messages within the context of the relationships at hand.

Second, a transactional communication perspective helps us highlight that *family members interact within cultural and social contexts*, such as ethnic heritage, gender patterns, and geographic location, which frame our experiences and expectations.[5] These understandings and expectations are always changing, sometimes slightly and other times dramatically.[6] What would happen if you became part of a family system based in a culture that holds different views on family power and decision-making than your family? Our perspectives are also influenced by factors such as traditions across generations, language patterns, or where we live (e.g., a rural or urban community).

Third, viewing communication as transactional necessitates that we recognize and understand *communication as a process*. This implies that communication and relationships are always developing and changing, and

communication both affects and reflects these changes. Moving into adulthood, you probably noticed a number of these changes, for example, a younger brother started discussing more adult topics, or you realized a need to increase care for aging parents or grandparents. We often become more aware of communication and relational changes during significant life events, such as moving out of the parents' household or seeing a relative move into an assisted-living facility. We also witness changes in everyday events, for instance, a child no longer wants a parent to tuck them into bed or an older aunt gives up hosting weekly family dinners. As big and small changes occur, family members will find the need to interact and renegotiate their relationships.

Fourth, from a transactional perspective, communication involves the *negotiation of shared meanings*.[7] If meanings are not shared by those interacting, confusion or misunderstanding ensues. Imagine that a parent gives their son a credit card to get clothes for an upcoming dance. The parent says, "Keep the cost to a reasonable amount." In their own mind, the parent may be thinking of $100 and is shocked to find $350 of expenses appearing on the credit card bill. A primary family task involves creating and negotiating meaning as we interact.[8] Think about how you and important adults in your life have negotiated meanings in your relationship across the years, and how this process is in continual flux as family members age and change. By taking a transactional perspective, we understand that communication is central to the process of creating and changing meanings that form a family's social reality.

Although meaning-making sounds like a very individualistic process, the transactional perspective helps us see that each communicator constantly affects and is affected by the other(s) in the family system as we saw in Chapter 1 when we talked about interdependence. As we discussed, perceptions are co-created within a relational system and are constantly influenced by that system, bringing unspoken beliefs and values to any interaction. One family member may believe that family should share their thoughts and feelings openly while another may believe that they have a

right to privacy within the family system. The more one pushes for openness, the more the other person(s) may pull back.

The family system provides a context for understanding how you and family members assign meaning to what you see, hear, and feel. If you consider handmade gifts from family as a special sign of caring, you may value a hand-knitted scarf, whereas an expensive necklace may not convey strong affection. The opposite may be true for another family member or in another family. In this way, “no two children grow up in the same family,” and siblings may disagree on the kind of family life they experienced together. One sibling may express, “Mom was very caring and nurturing,” whereas another believes, “Mom always wanted to interfere and smother us with too much involvement.” Meanings change over time as well. An oldest sibling may have experienced more cautious and strict parents, whereas the youngest child may experience parents who are more relaxed. Each person experiences family in their own unique way while sharing perceptions with the family system as well.

PHOTO 2.1 *Family members negotiate meanings in a variety of family activities.*

BearFotos/Shutterstock

Over time, family members interact to negotiate and coordinate shared meanings.[9] Meanings change and are renegotiated as adults witness the decline or death of elders, or as national or world events challenge people to reevaluate their values and beliefs.

Fifth, understanding communication as transaction means that we engage the *content level* and the *relationship level*s of meaning.[10] The content level contains information, whereas the relationship level indicates how the information should be interpreted or understood. The relationship level usually involves a greater reliance on nonverbal cues that help you interpret what was said within the context of a particular relationship. For example, when an older sister says to a younger sibling, "When are you going to pick up your clothes?" the content of the message seems clear, but the younger sibling must determine by the tone of their voice if they need to pick up their clothes later or in the next 30 seconds.

How do we best interpret relational aspects of a message? **Metacommunication** occurs when people communicate about their communication, giving verbal and nonverbal indications about how messages should be interpreted. Laughing and saying "Just kidding" signals how to interpret the message. Most often, we need to rely on nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, gestures, or vocal tones, to interpret a message. Metacommunication clues us into the relational level of messages and is especially important when using technology (e.g., phone, text, social media) as many of the nonverbal cues that help us interpret a message are reduced or missing. This is one reason many people like to add emojis or other symbols, such as setting off a message in *stars* to metacommunicate how they wish a message to be interpreted.

In this section, we discussed five characteristics of a transactional view of communication. Our discussion of communication as transaction should help us realize and better understand the complexity of communication within family systems.

In Chapter 1, we highlighted how we stand back and take a broad, comprehensive view of a process or phenomenon, what we referred to as a meta-theory when we discussed family systems theory. In the next section, we identify two additional broad, meta-theoretical approaches to understanding what family communication accomplishes: (a) communication as social construction of family relationships, and (b) communication patterns and family effects. Before we address each approach, take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and consider some of the shared meanings that are unique to your own family system.

BOX 2.2 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. List three examples of your family's important shared meanings that someone who visits you for a week may want to know to understand your family system.
2. What would you expect to change if you joined a family system based in a culture that holds different worldviews on family power and decision-making than your family?
3. How would you metacommunicate to help a family member understand the relational dimension of a message such as "Be ready to go by 9:30 a.m."?

COMMUNICATION AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

In this first meta-theoretical perspective on family communication, we focus on how families are co-created, maintained, and altered in communication.[11] This view of family communication comes from a meta-theoretical perspective, called **social construction**, that focuses on how we co-create our social world and relationships, including our families.[12] When your family demographics place you in the cultural majority where you live, it might be challenging to think about your family as socially constructed as you share common worldviews and roles with others around you. In this case, you do not have to carefully think about what it means to be and act as a family, your role in the family, or how you are expected to interact and behave. Those in the majority do not have to defend their family to others because their family form is the norm.

The experience of being the majority is not shared by all families, however. One author of your textbook, Kathleen Galvin, developed the concept of **discourse-dependence** to highlight relationships that do not have well-developed cultural models to guide them. These families are reliant on communication to co-create, legitimize, and change family meanings and identity.[13] Thinking about relationships, including families, as discourse-dependent helps bring to light challenges faced by families that are "nontraditional" – those that are sometimes called "evotypical" or "postmodern," such as adoptive, single-parent, LGBTQIA+, or stepfamilies.[14]

In comparison to two-parent, heterosexual, first-marriage families, discourse-dependent families have a greater reliance on communication to figure out how to communicate and to be a family. They will need to interact to develop their own unique set of roles and expectations because they do not have any or many existing cultural models to light their path.[15] For example, a divorced woman with children who remarries someone who also has children already knows what it's like to be a "mother," but she soon discovers that being a stepmother is different in challenging ways. Like most discourse-dependent families a stepfamily must interact and learn by trial and error the roles and expectations in the new family.[16] In another

example, same sex couples will need to interact and co-construct their own unique family identity, roles, and expectations for everyday life in the family and with people outside the family.[17]

Another discourse-dependent family form is chosen or voluntary kin, wherein people create families with those who are not biologically or legally related. In this "Family Matters," we learn about a research project to understand how people in discourse-dependent voluntary kin relationships socially construct what it means to be a voluntary family.

BOX 2.3 FAMILY MATTERS: CONSTRUCTING VOLUNTARY FAMILY THROUGH TALK

Communication scholar Dawn O. Braithwaite and her colleagues set out to understand the relationships of people who consider themselves to be family and are not related by birth (biology) or law (e.g., marriage). In this qualitative study, Braithwaite and her research team used a social construction framework to analyze 1,475 pages of interview transcripts from 110 people who said they had voluntary kin in their lives. The researchers discovered four different types of voluntary kin (VK) families: (a) substitute kin (VK stood in for or replaced the biological or legal family of origin in situations of death or complete estrangement); (b) supplemental kin (VK functioned as an addition to the family of origin, fulfilling needs unmet by the family of origin or stepping in when there was a geographic distance); (c) convenience kin (VK developed during a specific time period, such as during college or while serving in the military together); and (d) extended kin (VK were created from a coming together of both biological or legal family members with nonrelated others, for example, neighbors becoming family).

In all four of these VK types, the members came to regard each other as family as they interacted over time and co-created family

relationships, roles, and expectations. The VK families were socially constructed and discourse-dependent as they relied on communication, both within the relationship and externally, including their family of origin to create their family ties. Although VK represented a departure from families formed via biology or law, members of voluntary families most often used the traditional family model and labels to create, understand, and legitimize this new family form. For example, they might say, "She is like a sister to me" and use the traditional, biological sister relationship to figure out how to treat a VK sister. Braithwaite and colleagues came to understand how the different VK types are created in communication. In addition, these are significant and meaningful relationships that may be especially important when families of origin live far away, are missing due to death or estrangement, or do not share significant life values. For example, some LGBTQIA+ persons taking part in the study were estranged from, or just not close to, their family of origin. These VK relationships are most often significant and a lifelong substitute, or supplemental voluntary family ties.

For further reading, see Braithwaite, D. O., Bach, B. W., Baxter, L. A., DiVerniero, R., Hammonds, J., Hosek, A., and Wolf, B. (2010). Constructing family: A typology of voluntary kin. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *27*, 388–407. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407510361615

As we think about the experiences of more "nontraditional," discourse-dependent families, such as voluntary and other family forms, we can see the central role of communication in co-creating and living in these family systems. When you think about it, these families literally "talk themselves into being" and this challenge grows for discourse-dependent families. For instance, families that are made up of diverse ethnic groups face unique challenges to develop positive and healthy identities and to know how and

when to talk about this in the family.[18] You might be able to anticipate some of the challenges discourse-dependent families face as they develop.

Discourse-Dependence and Negotiating Internal and External Boundaries

Kathleen Galvin summarized strategies that discourse-dependent families use to navigate their internal and external family boundaries.[19] First, Galvin described four different strategies of *internal boundary management* through which discourse-dependent families create and maintain members' sense of "we-ness" or being a family: (a) naming, (b) discussing, (c) narrating, and (d) ritualizing (see Figure 2.1).

Internal Boundary Management

Naming

Naming plays a significant role in the development of internal family identity when members struggle to indicate their familial status and connections.

- We call my birth mother Aunt Carrie or Carrie.
- My stepgrandmother goes by "Nona Pat."

Discussing

Discussing reflects the degree of difference among family members, which affects the amount of ambiguity in their family situation. This occurs when members see few role models for their family form.

- We talk about Karin's anonymous sperm donor and his musical talents.

- Jack asked how he thought he should address his birth mother whom he located.

Narrating

Narrating involves the emergence of family stories; stories represent the family's definition of itself. Members tell and retell, to themselves and to others, the story of who they are and how they got there.

- Let's get out the scrapbook with your adoption story.
- Tell Uncle Jack about the first time I introduced you to your stepmother.

Ritualizing

Ritualizing allows families to accomplish their "emotional business" as they enact their identity. Family rituals include major celebrations and mundane routines.

- Our family celebrates "Gotcha Days," or the days on which they adopted each of us.
- My father and stepfather agreed to walk me down the aisle together.

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FIGURE 2.1
Internal boundary management strategies for communicating a sense of strategy.

Second, discourse-dependent families often need to explain and sometimes defend their families *externally* to those outside of the family. For example, researcher Karla Bergen studied the socially constructed identities of commuter wives (women who live away from their spouses and children part of the time because of work or school commitments).[20] Although men have more often lived away from family (e.g., truck drivers, military members), this is a much more "nontraditional" role for married women, especially for those with children at home. Karla Bergen found that commuter wives often received questions from extended family members, friends, and even strangers that highlighted the non-normative aspect of their family relationship. For example, people asked questions such as "You mean, your husband lets you do this?" or "How do you keep two houses clean?" These questions highlighted the perception that these women might be neglecting their role as a wife or mother. Many of the women found it necessary to explain and even defend their choice to be a commuter wife. In another study, communication scholar Elizabeth Suter interviewed parents who had adopted children from China. Adoptive parents were asked questions by others such as, "Is this your real child?" or "How much did it cost to get her?" These adoptive parents communicated in ways that affirmed and defended their family identity for others and for themselves.[21]

Kathleen Galvin also summarized four different strategies of *external boundary management* as discourse-dependent families communicate to clarify and legitimize their sense of "we-ness," or being a family to those outside of the family system: (a) labeling, (b) explaining, (c) legitimizing, and (d) defending (see Figure 2.2).

When we take a social construction perspective to understand family systems, we better understand how, in our everyday interaction, we create our social realities as individuals and families. You may have noticed that all the examples we used to highlight discourse-dependence are "nontraditional" or evotypical families. However, it is important for us to stress that *all families are socially constructed* and thus discourse-dependent, even when this process is less obvious in "traditional" families. Although you might have grown up not having to think much about what it

means to be a partner, uncle, or parent in your own culture, you may experience the discourse-dependent nature of your own family roles, for example, if you and a romantic partner choose not to have children or decide to cohabit outside of marriage.

Understanding family communication via a lens of social construction and families as discourse-dependent help us focus on how we continually communicate to co-create, define, and redefine our family relationships, as well as our personal identity, as we make and remake our families throughout the lifespan.[22]

BOX 2.4 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. How did your family communicate to alter your family identity following a significant stressful event? Was this change temporary or permanent?
2. What are examples of both internal and external boundary management strategies your family uses to communicate and perhaps legitimize or defend your family identity?
3. In what ways does or would your family need to negotiate your discourse-dependence if your family is not part of the cultural majority in your community?

External Boundary Management

Labeling

Titles and positions provide an orientation to a situation; labeling frequently involves identifying the familial tie when introducing or referring to another person.

- I want you to meet ____, my [choose option] stepfather, Bill, my mother's husband, my Pops.
- Maggie is … [choose option] my mother's friend, my mother's partner, my stepmother.

Explaining

Explaining involves making a labeled family relationship understandable for others, for example, giving reasons for it, or elaborating on how it works. Usually this is a response to a non-hostile inquiry.

- My sister used a sperm donor and her eggs. I was the gestational carrier.
- We adopted him from China when he was 8 months old.

Legitimizing

Legitimizing invokes the sanction of law or custom: Members find themselves having to position their family relationship as genuine and conforming to recognized standards.

- My mother and Don have been together for 14 years. He functions as my father.
- I adopted my husband's son after his former wife died. He calls me "Moms."

Defending

Defending involves shielding oneself or a familial relationship from attack, justifying it, or maintaining its validity against opposition. This is a response to hostility or a direct challenge.

- My mother gets enraged when people ask if I'm her "real daughter."
- When someone tells me my mothers will go to hell, I tell them off.

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FIGURE 2.2 *External boundary management strategies for communicating a sense of family.*

COMMUNICATION PATTERNS AND FAMILY EFFECTS

The second perspective on family communication involves what some scholars have called an *effectual* approach.[23] In the effectual approach, we understand communication patterns that influence how families live life together by predicting outcomes that follow the patterns, such as family health, well-being, acceptance, and other variables. In this section, we focus on two theoretical approaches that represent this perspective. Via communication, families create their family form and expectations as members engage in different family-related functions. Simply speaking, a **function** is something a system must do, or an operation it must perform, to establish family identity and carry out family life. In this next section, we discuss two effectual approaches to understanding how communication facilitates family functioning: (a) the circumplex model of marital and family systems, and (b) family communication patterns theory.

Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems

In their attempt to integrate the numerous concepts related to marital and family interaction, family researchers David Olson and his colleagues developed what is known as the circumplex model of marital and family systems.[24] This model is useful as it connects family theory, research, and practice by identifying two central dimensions of family behavior, or family functions, that characterize all family systems: family cohesion and family adaptability. Each of these dimensions is divided into four levels matched on a grid to create 16 possible combinations of family functioning, which Olson described as different family types. The four family types in the center of the grid that have at least moderate scores on cohesion and flexibility are called *balanced*; the four family types at the extreme corners of the grid with extreme scores on cohesion and flexibility are called *dysfunctional*.

Over time, Olson revised the circumplex model to include three dimensions: (a) cohesion, (b) adaptability, and (c) communication. The two central dimensions remain family cohesion and adaptability, which are identified as the intersecting lines of an axis that can be used to classify families based on their level of functioning. The third dimension is family communication, which is positioned as a facilitating dimension that enables couples and families to move along the cohesion and adaptability dimensions, but because communication is a facilitating dimension, it is seldom included in the model diagrams. We do not present the entire circumplex model here; rather, we focus on the primary dimensions of cohesion and adaptability as main family functions facilitated by different kinds of communication behaviors. With this in mind, let’s examine how family members might experience each dimension before considering one theory of family communication that informs our understanding of how families move to greater or lesser degrees of cohesion and adaptability.

Cohesion From the moment of birth, you have been learning how to manage issues of distance and closeness within your family system. You were taught directly or subtly how to be connected to, or separated from,

other family members.[25] For example, you received messages about when to solve problems on your own and when you should ask others for help. Every family socializes its members about the extent to which closeness is encouraged or discouraged. **Cohesion** is defined as the emotional bonding and closeness that family members experience with each other. Cohesion includes concepts of "emotional bonding, boundaries, coalitions, time, space, friends, decision-making, interests and recreation."[26] Scholars from various fields discuss cohesion as central to understanding family life and connected to a family's need to establish a pattern of separateness and connectedness.[27] There are four levels of cohesion in the circumplex model:

1. *Disengaged*. At the lowest level of cohesiveness, family members maintain extreme separateness and independence, experiencing little belonging or loyalty.
2. *Connected*. With some degree of cohesiveness, family members experience emotional independence as well as some sense of involvement and belonging.
3. *Cohesive*. As family cohesiveness grows in intensity, family members strive for emotional closeness, loyalty, and togetherness with only some emphasis on individuality.
4. *Enmeshed*. At the highest level of cohesiveness, family members experience extreme closeness, loyalty, dependence, and almost no individuality.[28]

Through their communication, family members develop, maintain, or change their patterns of cohesion. For instance, a father may decide that it is appropriate to limit playful roughhousing with an adolescent daughter. This nonverbal message may be confusing or hurtful to the daughter unless the father can explain or find other ways to demonstrate closeness and may include the daughter to find different activities to do together.

Using the circumplex model helps us see that balanced families generally are found at *connected* or *cohesive* levels, and thus, tend to be more functional. In *enmeshed* families, however, members are so intensely

bonded and over-involved with one another that individuals experience little autonomy or fulfillment of their own personal needs and goals. Family members appear fused or joined so tightly, total loyalty is expected, and identities do not develop appropriately. In enmeshed families, members are highly interdependent and can have negative effects, for example, a mother who treats a daughter as a best friend may be a mixed blessing for the daughter, who is unable to experience independence. At the other end of the cohesion continuum, members of *disengaged* families experience extreme emotional separateness. In these families, each member is given high autonomy and individuality as individual interests are prioritized. Whereas individual members have greater independence, the family may sacrifice closeness.

Throughout this book, we will examine a variety of ways that families handle issues of coming together or remaining apart, and how they communicate to influence their levels of cohesion. We note that families do not remain permanently at one point on the cohesion continuum and will experience fluctuations across the lifespan and at critical junctures of change or stress. What appears connected or cohesive for one family may be viewed as disengaged or enmeshed for another family. In addition, there are widely varying cultural norms for acceptable or desirable levels of cohesion.

Adaptability (or Flexibility) When you think of the changes in your own family over the past five or ten years, you may be amazed at how different the system and its members are at this point in time. A family experiences change as members move through expected developmental stages, such as cohabiting with a romantic partner or adult children leaving home. Families also experience change following different stressors that arise and need attention, such as adapting to an illness, a cross country move, or starting a new career path. Even everyday living involves managing relational tensions that necessitate greater or lesser degrees of flexibility on a short or long-term basis.

According to Olson and his colleagues, **flexibility** can be defined as the amount of adaptability and change in a family's roles, relationships, and rules. Family adaptability focuses on how family systems manage stability and change, and it ranges from extremely low to extremely high levels as follows:

1. *Rigid*. At extremely low levels of adaptability, family members experience an inability to change in response to internal and external demands, as well as authoritarian leadership and strict roles and rules.
2. *Structured*. With some degree of flexibility, family members experience more moderate levels of change, as well as limited shared decision-making, leadership, and relatively stable roles and rules.
3. *Flexible*. With increased adaptability, family members experience high levels of change, shared decision-making, and shifting rules and roles.
4. *Chaotic*. At extremely high levels of flexibility, family members experience very high levels of change, non-existent leadership, confusion, and inconsistent (or non-existent) rules and roles.[29]

Each family system needs periods of stability as well as change to function well. *Chaotic* families are characterized by little structure, few rules, and constantly changing roles. For example, following parental divorce, family rules and roles may be shifting wildly. Too much unpredictability is problematic as members cannot reach common meanings, know what to do and say, and maintain relationships. At the other extreme, *rigid* families resist change and growth, leaving members continuously repeating old patterns that can inhibit healthy family relationships. *Flexible* families find a way to balance levels of adaptability and family members avoid extreme chaos or rigidity.

Family systems constantly restructure themselves as they pass through what are, for many, predictable developmental life stages (see Chapter 4), such as pregnancy or aging. Likewise, when positive or negative unexpected events and stresses arise, such as unemployment or economic gain, families must adapt. Finally, family systems must adapt both

structurally and functionally to the demands of other social institutions, such as churches, and to members' individual needs, such as disability or participation in elite sports activities. For example, a family may decide not to drink alcohol as they start attending a new church that prohibits drinking or when one of their members starts treatment for alcohol abuse.

You can think about how your own family experiences and handles the need for both stability and adaptation. What role does communication play in the adaptive function of your family system? Olson and his colleagues hypothesized that when families exhibit a balance between change and stability, more mutually assertive communication styles, shared leadership, successful negotiation, role-sharing, and open rule-sharing occur.[30] How does this research finding fit your family's experience?

As we mentioned earlier, although the term "communication" does not appear on the various visual representations of the circumplex model, David Olson and colleagues understand that communication is a critical factor in how families manage cohesion and flexibility. They suggested that communication facilitates a family's movement to greater or lesser degrees of cohesion and adaptability via six communication behaviors: (a) active listening, (b) speaking skills, (c) self-disclosure, (d) clarity, (e) staying on topic, and (f) communicating respectfully. Communication researcher Paul Schrodt added to this initial list by emphasizing the importance of empathy, expressiveness, and effective problem-solving in helping to create healthy levels of family cohesion and flexibility.[31] Families lacking these important communication skills are often unable to pivot and change when needed.

Applying the work of David Olson and his colleagues, you can visualize the mutual interaction of family cohesion and adaptability by placing them on an axis (see Figure 2.3a). By adding the extremes of cohesion (disengagement and enmeshment) and adaptability (rigidity and chaos), you can imagine where more or less functional families would appear and think about how you might locate your own past or present family system (see Figure 2.3b).

As most well-functioning or balanced families avoid the extremes, the central area of the model represents balanced or optimal levels of cohesion

and adaptability for most families and situations. The outside areas of the model represent the extremes of cohesion and adaptability, which are often characterized by less healthy and/or dysfunctional communication patterns. However, there may be instances when a different pattern could help a family through a particular developmental point or through a crisis (see Chapter 11). For example, a family might benefit from becoming temporarily more cohesive and enmeshed as they pull together in a family emergency. If a family member becomes seriously ill or dies, a highly cohesive communication pattern may be temporarily helpful as the family mourns the loss and adjusts to life without this person. At the time of a family death, for instance, members may find themselves at point Y (see Figure 2.4a). The family may be experiencing extreme closeness among surviving family members but chaos in terms of dealing with the changes in roles or in carrying out everyday activities. In contrast, a family with a teenager may find itself shifting from point X to point Z on the axis, as the adolescent expects and demands greater freedom and less connectedness from the family, forcing changes in other relationships in the system (see Figure 2.4b).

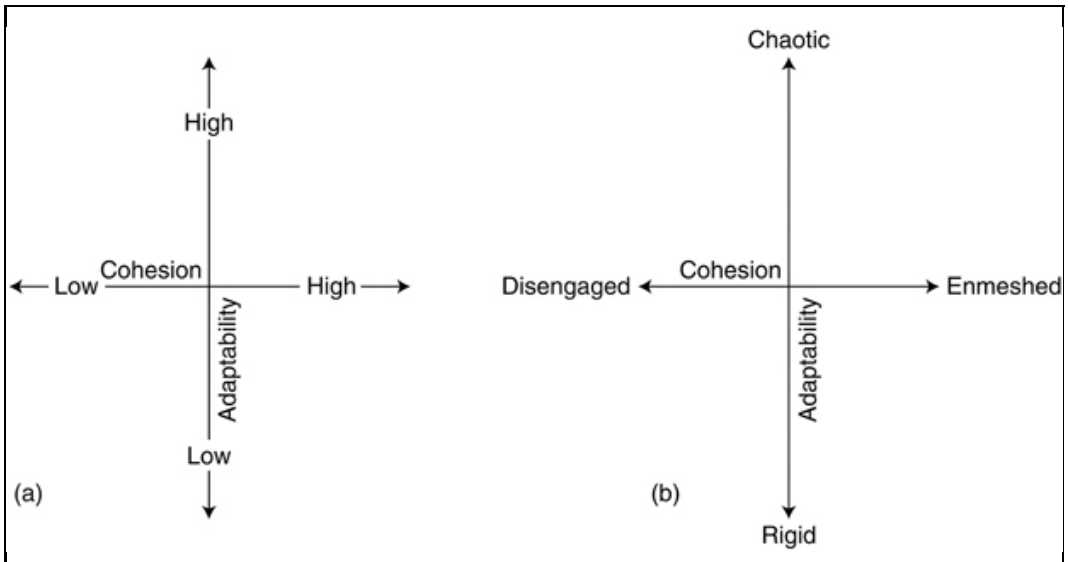

FIGURE 2.3 *Family cohesion – adaptability axes.*

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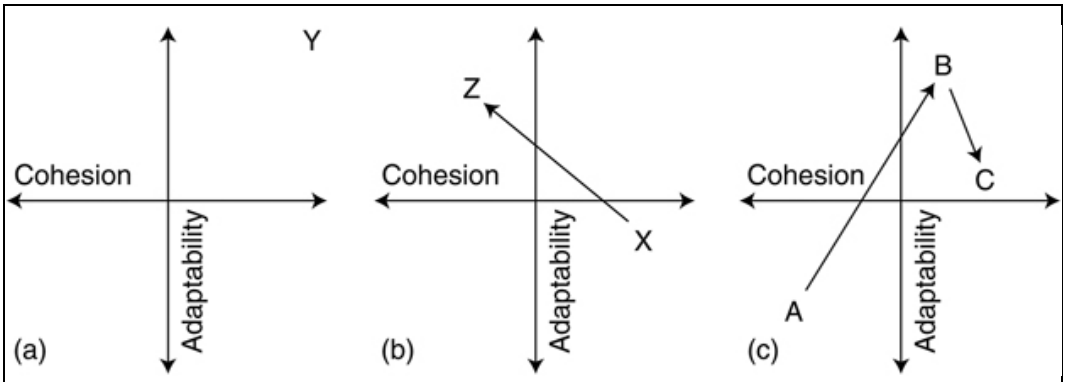

FIGURE 2.4 *Application of family cohesion – adaptability.*

To understand the usefulness of the circumplex model, we can see how to graph family experience over time (in more than one move) (see Figure 2.4c), as in this example:

> As a small child, I lived in an active alcoholic family in which people kept pretty much to themselves. We did not talk about the problems caused by our parents' drinking and we acted as if things were fine. Yet we were very rigid because we never could bring friends into the house, and we never let outsiders know about the drinking. My older sister always took care of me if there was a problem, while my older brother locked himself in his room (point A). When my parents finally went into treatment, the house was crazy in a different way for a while, since no one knew exactly how to act, but we did get closer, and we were all forced to discuss what was going on. I guess we got closer and almost too flexible or unpredictable (point B). Now, five years later, I'm the only child left at home and my sober parents and I have a relatively close and flexible relationship (point C).

Families at different developmental stages appear more functional in different quadrants of the model, depending on their needs at different stages. For instance, if you look at Figure 2.4, young couples without

children may function best in either the upper-right or lower-left quadrants and older couples best in the lower-right quadrant. Adolescents may function best when they have average cohesion, being neither enmeshed with parents or disengaged, and when their adaptability is midway between rigidity and chaos. Although these trends may differ for families from different cultures or from particular sets of values, in general, researchers support practices that help families maintain flexibility that helps them best adjust and cope.

As you observe families around you, you will see the usefulness of the cohesion and adaptability dimensions of the circumplex model as a backdrop for understanding how family communication relates to other central family variables, such as health and well-being. With this in mind, let us turn our attention to a second theory communication scholars have used to advance our understanding of family functioning.

Family Communication Patterns Theory

For families to function at optimal levels of cohesion and adaptability, members must be able to coordinate their daily activities and behaviors and function as a group. Family communication patterns (FCP) theory attempts to explain how family members develop a shared social reality through communication, based largely upon family members' perceptions of agreement in attitudes, beliefs, and values.[32] According to this theory, all families are characterized by shared worldviews that are unique to each family and that reflect individual family members with value and belief systems, or schemas.[33] **Schemas** represent organized knowledge structures that individuals use to make sense of different phenomena. From FCP theory, we see how people develop an initial set of schemas from working models of how parents and children interact, and shape how we perceive our social environments and communicate with those inside and outside the family.

To achieve some level of agreement and coordinate their daily activities, family members rely on two primary schemas, or orientations, to

communication. First, a **conversation orientation** references the degree to which all family members are encouraged to participate in unrestrained interaction about a wide range of topics.[34] Families high in conversation orientation encourage members to talk frequently and openly about a variety of issues; they spend a lot of time sharing their thoughts, feelings, and updates with each other. Conversely, individuals from families low in conversation orientation interact less frequently as they typically avoid discussing most of their private thoughts, feelings, and activities with family members.

Second, a **conformity orientation** refers to the degree to which family communication stresses a climate of similarity of beliefs, values, and attitudes.[35] Families high in conformity orientation emphasize a uniformity of beliefs and attitudes, obedience to authority figures, and interdependence of family members. In essence, high conformity families believe in what we would consider a "traditional" family structure; they tend to be highly cohesive and hierarchical and highlight family relationships over external relationships.[36] Families low in conformity orientation believe in the independence of family members and value personal interests and relationships outside the family.[37]

▶ Scripts

Using these two orientations to family communication, researchers have identified four family types: (a) pluralistic, (b) consensual, (c) protective, and (d) laissez-faire (see Figure 2.5). Think about which type best represents your family. *Pluralistic families* are high in conversation orientation and low in conformity orientation. Adults or parents in these families encourage open, unconstrained discussions that involve all family members and a wide range of topics and more shared decision-making. In *consensual families*, which are high in both conversation and conformity orientations, communication is characterized by a tension between pressure to agree and to honor adult authority and open dialogue and exploring new

ideas together.[38] *Protective families* possess low conversation orientation and high conformity orientation, with communication characterized by an emphasis on obedience to parental authority and little to no concern for open communication. These adults largely or completely retain the right to make family decisions.[39] *Laissez-faire families* are low in both conversation and conformity orientations. These parents and children are largely uninvolved in each other's lives and tend to talk infrequently and on a limited number of topics. Members of laissez-faire families are emotionally distanced and avoid conflict. Children from laissez-faire families learn to look to people outside the family for support and help making decisions.

As you can see, conversation and conformity orientations provide important information about how family members relate to one another and communicate. Looking at the circumplex model and family communication patterns theory together, researchers have found that both conversation and conformity orientations help facilitate the primary functions of family cohesion and adaptability[40] and are associated with a variety of family communication behaviors and relational outcomes, such as conflict, affection, deception, satisfaction, and closeness. Likewise, conversation and conformity orientations predict family members' health and well-being, although conversation orientation is more predictive of health outcomes than conformity orientation.[41]

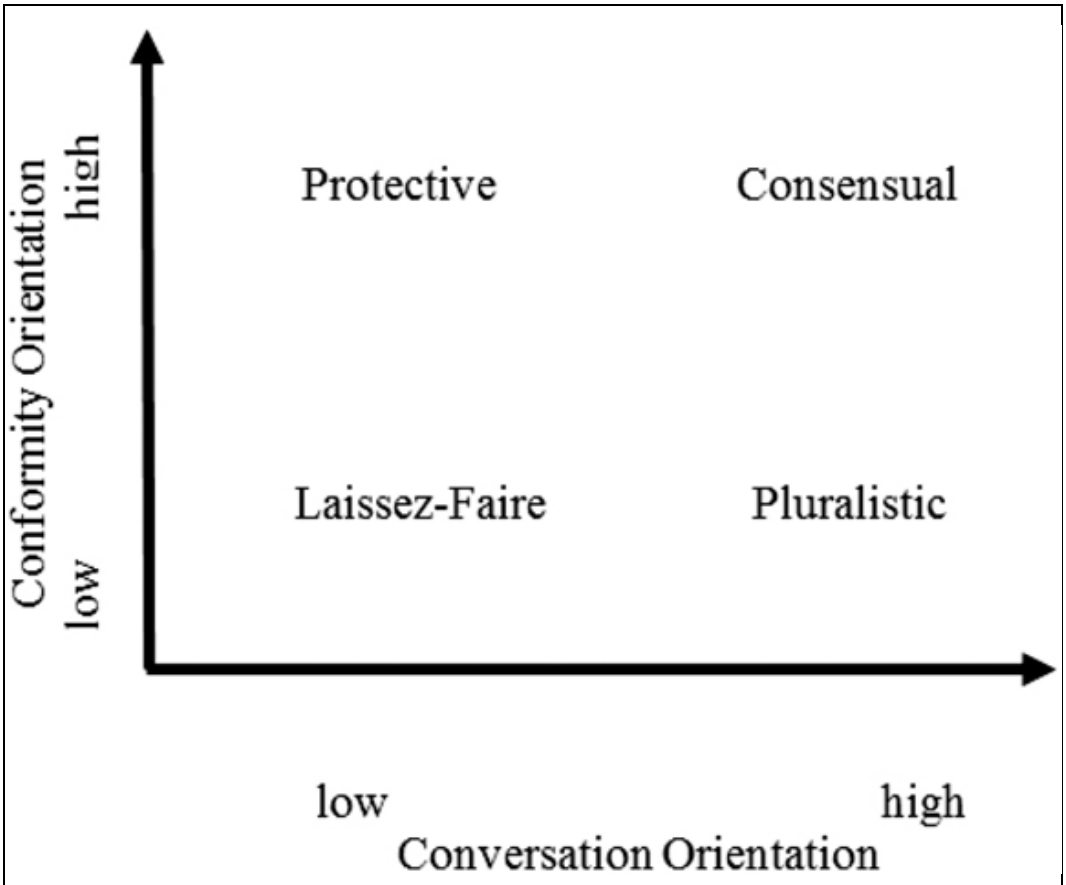

FIGURE 2.5 *Four family types created by conversation and conformity orientations.*

Koerner, A. F., & Schrodt, P. (2014). An introduction to the special issue on family communication patterns theory. Journal of Family Communication, 14(1), 1–15. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Taylor & Francis, www.tandfonline.com.

When you think back to your own family, what type of family orientation do you believe you grew up in? How high or low were your family's conversation and conformity orientations? How did your family's conversation and conformity orientations influence family cohesiveness and adaptability? These are but a few of the questions you can consider as you apply FCP theory to the primary functions identified by the circumplex model. Now that we have explained the social construction and communication patterns and processes approaches to family

communication, we turn to four supporting functions that also influence family communication.

BOX 2.5 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. How might an enmeshed family communicate in ways that differ from a disengaged family? Which family type normally best describes your family?
2. Which of the four family types on the circumplex model (rigid, structured, flexible, chaotic) best represents your family's flexibility? What are strengths and limitations to your family type?
3. How does your family's communication reflect your family schemas regarding conversation and conformity orientations?

SUPPORTING FUNCTIONS SHAPING FAMILY COMMUNICATION

It is easier to understand that family systems are socially constructed through patterns of interaction that influence family outcomes when we take into account some of the important functions that shape family life. Very early on, sociologists Robert Hess and Gerald Handel identified processes, or *family functions*, that impact the development of a family's message system.[42] One of these functions relates to cohesion, which encompasses closeness and bonding. We now turn to brief discussions of four other important supporting family functions: (a) family themes, (b)

family metaphors, (c) family boundaries, and (d) family biosocial roles. Each of these functions interact with a family's cohesion and adaptability and influences a family's communication patterns. These functions also help the family maintain and repair relationships and become resilient (which we discuss more fully in Chapter 6).[43]

Family Themes

First, a **family theme** is a prominent pattern of feelings, motives, fantasies, and understandings grouped around a particular locus of concern in a family system.[44] Themes capture a family's fundamental worldview within a set of values, such as security, strength, dependability, caretaking, inclusion, separation, and kindness. They reflect who we are and how we communicate. Family themes are reflected in statements about collective values and identity of a particular family system, for example, "Garcias play to win," or "Samsons always support family first." Themes represent generalized values a particular family adopts, for instance, "Always be prepared and have Plan B," or "Blood is thicker than water and you can only depend on your family."

As family themes reflect the beliefs and values that guide family members' actions, you can observe and understand a family's themes by what they say and do (and do not). A family with the theme "We have a responsibility for those less fortunate" might volunteer building a Habitat for Humanity home or donate to a foodbank. In this way, cohesive families with prominent themes display a clear family identity. However, we see in the example of Bruce and Melissa at the start of this chapter that family members may hold divergent themes about the role of family and its relationship to outsiders. To the extent family themes are shared, they undergird everyday life. For example, one family had a large stained-glass window made featuring the words "Giving Thanks" and hung it on the front door of their home for all to see, including themselves. As the parents moved to assisted living, this window now graces the front door of one of their local adult children.

PHOTO 2.2 *Some families have a theme of "Working together keeps us together."*

stockfour/Shutterstock

Family themes may also be explicit and discussed, or implicit and assumed, by some or all family members. One risk to leaving themes as implicit is that there may not be clarity or agreement about they mean and/or what to do and say among the whole family or subsystem. For example, the parents in one family believed the family shared the theme of "you can always depend on your family" and stressed their children should come to them in a crisis. However, the children operated under the theme of "don't upset mom and dad." When the children needed help, they sought out friends and extended family members rather than their parents.

This "Family Portrait" by Dr. Elizabeth Suter demonstrates how outsiders' view of her family theme called into question the theme that an adoptive family is more alike than different from other families.

BOX 2.6 FAMILY PORTRAIT: DR. ELIZABETH SUTER, UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

Dr. Suter's website https://portfolio.du.edu/esuter (Not accessible as of 06-Aug-2024) here

What drew you to study family communication?

When I took my first course on interpersonal communication, I was on my way to law school. The class shifted my track. The class opened up previously inaccessible ways of thinking about relationships and families that was exhilarating for me. I went on to earn a master's degree and doctorate in the area and am currently a university professor.

What are your main areas of family research?

I identify as a feminist, social-justice-oriented family communication scholar. My primary areas of research are family identity, family diversity, gender, and culture, particularly in relation to transracial, transnationally adoptive families and LGBTQ families.

How has your own family influenced what you teach and study?

Right after I finished my doctorate and began a faculty line, my partner and I adopted a child from China. As we are both white and living in majority white communities, we found ourselves in new, very unsettling interactions in which strangers commented on and questioned our family's differences in race, ethnicity, and national origin. I had been researching issues of family identity, diversity, and culture (mainly focused on lesbian co-mother families). These interactions involving my adopted child became a catalyst for me to integrate issues of race and adoption into my program of research.

How can family communication students use your research in their own family life?

From the beginning of my career, I have been committed to creating theoretically driven, translational scholarship that not only advances research, but also provides help to diverse families navigating complexities of adoption, race, and sexual orientation. Across the years, I have actively developed practical materials based on my research findings and those of my colleagues. Additionally, in the classes I teach at my university, students routinely work with local non-profits to address family-related social issues in the Denver metro and beyond.

Family Metaphors

Second, relationship patterns can be viewed as metaphors by which people understand one element in terms of another, for example, the family is the bedrock of life. *Root metaphors* capture the family's core values, revealing the family's worldview. Root metaphors might reflect valuing service, competition, spirituality, or achievement. Researchers identified 138 different metaphor options to represent college students' family of origin, for example, they might characterize the family as a tree, rock, circus,

security blanket, jail, safety net, or team. The researchers labeled each family metaphor as positive, negative, or neutral.[45] Some families find identifying metaphors relatively easy, if it is truly a root metaphor for the family. In addition, there may be different levels of agreement on a given family's metaphor.

If you had to create a single mental image or a root metaphor for your family, what would it be – a nest, a broken wagon wheel, a corporation, a rowing team? Root metaphors affect and reflect how individuals and the family interact with each other and relate to the outside world.[46] For instance, one young adult child explained their family's root metaphor following the death of the wife and mother in the family,

> Our family has become like a basketball team, with my dad as a player-coach. We all work together for the survival of our team, and we all contribute … there is always that force driving us to achieve more together.

Researchers discovered that the ability to develop common themes, metaphors, and stories, and to engage in joint perspective-taking, is related to family health and well-being.[47]

Family themes and metaphors reflect members' collective identity and sense of connection, as shaped by interaction. Themes and metaphors will reflect both affirming and punishing family cultures. It is important to stress that complete consensus around family themes and metaphors is unlikely, especially as individual and family-level change is ongoing. Indeed, one potential strength or weakness of a family is how well the family can adapt their core themes and metaphors over time.[48]

Family Boundaries

Third, family boundaries exist between family members and between the family and the outside world. You can imagine **boundaries** as physical or psychological borders that regulate family members' access to people,

places, ideas, and values. Some families have more open and flexible boundaries, allowing easy movement across them. For example, some families encourage members to explore a wide variety of friendships, political ideas, religious practices, or test family beliefs. Other families would find open border practices threatening and favor keeping the family more separate from outside influences.

Families with *open boundaries* support the flow of information as they tend to value what comes in from the external environment. Although we can see some advantages to having open family boundaries, there are downsides to having few or no family boundaries at all, as these families provide little collective identity and tend to be chaotic. Families with rigid or closed boundaries are motivated to protect the family system or certain family members. These families retain partial or complete control, especially of children's activities, to prevent them from experiencing people or ideas considered different or undesirable. For instance, researchers studied how parents viewed their role in establishing boundaries with adolescent daughters concerning mobile phone and social media use. Parents ranged from no oversight to tight controls. The researchers found that most parents struggled with what "good parenting" was in this context, and in the best of circumstances, how they wanted to involve their daughters in creating their family's approaches and how much control they wanted to demonstrate.[49]

One central family boundary, known as a privacy boundary, is how they regard and socialize members with respect to what information will be shared within and outside of the family (see our discussion of communication privacy management theory in Chapter 3). Families are continually negotiating what information or family secrets are acceptable to share with others. For example, family members may be instructed not to reveal information to extended family, outsiders, or certain members of the household about family finances or the existence of a nonbinary family member.[50] Even when families want to control privacy boundaries, it can be challenging because everyday interactions occur in social systems[51] such as schools, workplaces, churches, and on social media. Families desiring rigid

external boundaries may choose to home school children or restrict access to certain people or social media.

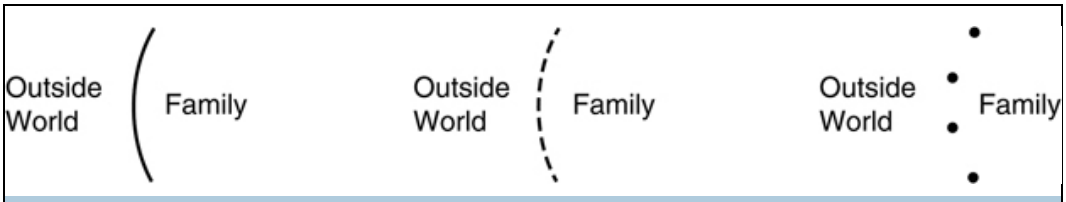

FIGURE 2.6 *External boundaries.*

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Members of family systems also establish internal boundaries with one another and around particular subsystems within the family. For example, the adult subsystem represents a significant, bounded dyad that shares private information, as well as sexual and emotional connections. In most families, children are not allowed to share in all aspects of their parents' relationship, and parents establish privacy boundaries around themselves.[52] For example, some parents establish a privacy boundary around their own illness and financial status and make efforts to engage in conflict behind closed doors.

Internal boundary expectations may also differ across cultural groups. Given the high degree of interdependence among extended family members in particular cultures, a family may have less rigid boundaries within and between households, which creates strong emotional ties and mutual assistance. For example, in a study of adolescents and family members in African American, Native American, and Latino families, adolescents were healthier and more resilient when they had strong connections with family.[53] When new immigrant families face issues such as language barriers or financial struggles, extended family ties may become even more important.[54]

Understanding how families create and establish expectations, and enforce family boundaries, is important to family membership and interacting within and without the family household. You can see how family boundaries are related to family cohesion and adaptability, as well as healthy and unhealthy family communication practices.

Family Biosocial Issues

Fourth, families operate within a larger culture that provides models and socializes members into biosocial roles based on such factors as: (a) gender, (b) ethnicity, (c) biology and genetic issues, and (d) power. All these family biosocial issues are interrelated and suggest or govern relationships within and outside of the family system. These different biosocial issues permeate our understanding of family dynamics throughout this book, and we briefly develop them here.

First, family communication and gender permeate this book as the family serves as a primary source of gender identity.[55] Gender identity both affects and reflects family interaction, framing, and limiting the experiences of members of the family system. A family that assigns responsibilities based on gender differs from one that uses personal interest or preference as the basis for expectations, especially as we understand gender as transcending binaries of female and male. Gendered familial expectations may be subtle and surprising. For example, family studies scholar Ramona Oswald examined how LGBTQIA+ family members were regarded and treated at heterosexual family weddings, expecting them to wear certain “traditional” gendered clothing or not dance with same-sex partners, for instance.[56] A focus on gender expands how we conceptualize the family, highlighting the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender bodies and identities. In addition, reframing how we understand and enact gender in the family system has several implications, including a resistance to gendered expectations favoring white, heterosexual, Western-based families and recognizing their resistance to change.[57]

Second, *ethnicity* reflects cultural factors such as common history and social experiences, ancestry, language, nationality, and beliefs. For instance, ethnicity may represent an immigrant group's social class and occupational opportunities that link to jobs, housing opportunities, and political conditions.[58] A family's ethnic heritage includes communication norms and expectations, which are often maintained and transmitted across generations. For example, an emphasis on "keeping things in the family," or the way in which sensitive subjects are discussed, passes from generation to generation, reflecting individual and cultural influences.

Family members interact about ethnicity via socializing messages to children, for example, messages about racial identity and prejudice, including family narratives about these experiences for persons with marginalized identifies.[59] The influence of ethnicity can be powerful because members of family systems retain ethnic values and identification across many generations, creating a sense of belonging and identity and framed within differences these identities highlight, such as population shifts and broader cultural developments.[60]

Multiracial/ethnic families are especially discourse-dependent, and members must rely on communication as they co-create and navigate their identities, family roles, and expectations within the family and externally with others.[61] Family communication scholars are studying interaction within multiracial/ethnic families as intergroup communication to better understand how interaction influences family members' identification across cultural groups.[62] Tina Harris and colleagues argued that people who are of mixed race or ethnicity face additional challenges in self-identity including how to label themselves and may confront stressors from inside and outside family boundaries, such as managing verbal and nonverbal messages they receive from those inside and outside the family.[63]

Third, *biology and genetics* influences family communication.[64] The impact of physiology, genetics, and evolution on interaction patterns has gained greater attention, due to a renewed focus on biological contributions to individual and family communication practices.[65] Researchers are

discovering evolutionary and biological influences on communication, such as exchanging affection,[66] investing in relationships, and ending relationships when trust has been sacrificed.[67]

Biology not only *influences* family communication, but it is also a *topic* of family communication, especially related to health outcomes (see Chapter 12).[68] Communication about the family and genetics involves both disclosure and discussion. In the cases of genetic disorders, factors such as gender, culture, family role, family structure, and privacy rules can impact how and what the first family member identified as having the disease (who is called the *proband*) communicates with the rest of the family.[69] Once an initial illness disclosure is made, ongoing family discussions tend to be reflective of established family communication patterns, such as open versus closed boundaries, or negotiating private information will influence information sharing and interaction over health and genetics.

Fourth, *power* has a central role in all relationships, including families and intersects with different biosocial aspects of families, such as gender, ethnicity, and social class.[70] To what extent are decision-making and authority issues resolved according to "traditional" social and role configurations? How do families either reproduce or resist inequitable power relationships? Those adopting a critical feminist view of family reject conceptions of a "traditional" family form and roles and limiting and delegitimizing alternate family models.[71] Flexible families question taken-for-granted culture assumptions about gender (and related factors), engaging in negotiations about power and family decision-making in ways that promote equality and social change, with the goal of promoting more equitable relationships. Whereas some of these power decisions or norms are based on ethnicity and gender, other factors come into play, for example, the socioeconomic statuses of families and how families navigate technology.[72]

Family themes, metaphors, boundaries, and biosocial issues interact with how a family functions on dimensions of cohesion and adaptability. You will find it insightful to reflect on how these functions manifest themselves

in your own family of origin and how they change over time, including your own predicted future expectations. It is important to remember that communication in family systems both reflects and influences a family's most central values. Through interaction, families establish their patterns of cohesion and adaptability and develop their images, themes, boundaries, and responses to biosocial issues, thus reminding us again about the central role of communication in co-creating and enacting family relationships.

BOX 2.7 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. How does your family communicate 2–3 main themes to those outside the family?
2. In what ways or situations would you describe your family boundaries as open? Closed?
3. How do family biosocial issues such as, gender, ethnicity, and power influence the relationships within your family?.

FAMILY OF ORIGIN INFLUENCES

We end this chapter with a discussion of the significant influence of our family(ies) of origin. We might hear people say, "My son's a Rosenstein, all right. He'll walk up and talk to anyone without a trace of shyness," or "Our family lives by the proverb that 'a small house has enough room for one hundred people who love each other'." The term **family of origin** refers to the family or families in which a person is raised, generally considered to

be the earliest and most powerful influence on personal development, and a primary source of individual and family identity and expectations.

Family of origin factors influence what each person brings to family experience and relationships, how they communicate, and can both facilitate and limit the current and future family system. Given your own family of origin experiences, you may attempt to create an adult family similar or different from the one you experienced as a child. This is important to think about, as researchers have identified links between family of origin attachment styles to current family patterns, for example, romantic relationships in adulthood.[73] In addition, adolescent experiences of hostility or positive engagement in their family of origin are predictors of these behaviors in their own children.[74]

Multigenerational Transmissions

Families of origin provide important blueprints for communication and relational patterns of future generations. Communication is modeled and learned in the home and the family setting provides a major testing ground for new communication skills or strategies. Each young person who leaves the family of origin to form their own relational and family system carries a set of conscious and unconscious rules and expectations of relating to others, based on the socializing influence of their family.[75] Consequently, the family of origin serves as the first communication classroom from which a person forms their own sets of adult relationships. Patterns learned in the family of origin tend to persist unless there is significant intervention or other reasons to change.

Gender roles, patterns of closeness and distance, influences of race and ethnicity, boundary management practices, conflict patterns, and parenting styles are all subject to multigenerational transmission.[76] Serious family challenges like destructive eating patterns, drug abuse, divorce, and mismanagement of finances (to name a few) appear to have some basis in family of origin experiences and communication.[77] These patterns may emerge, consciously or unconsciously, across three or four generations.

Although some people replicate the problematic patterns of their family of origin, members can change negative patterns and establish better-functioning adult familial relationships.[78]

To better understand multigenerational patterns, professionals and family members themselves can employ visual models or images called family genograms. A **genogram** is a multigenerational map or model that visually depicts family relationships. Genograms are designed to display important information about social relationships, internal and external boundaries, or biological or psychological issues in the family across one or multiple generations.[79] Genograms help members of family systems see and better understand the influences of their own intergenerational transmissions.[80]

Look at Figure 2.7, a multigenerational genogram that contains examples of highly connected parent–child relationships, a family theme of service, and flexible boundaries. In this genogram design, males are represented by squares and females by circles. The nature of the lines that link people reflects the interactive nature of their relationship. For example, jagged lines imply conflict.

PHOTO 2.3 *Messages and meanings pass from one generation to the next.*

Monkey Business Images/Shutterstock

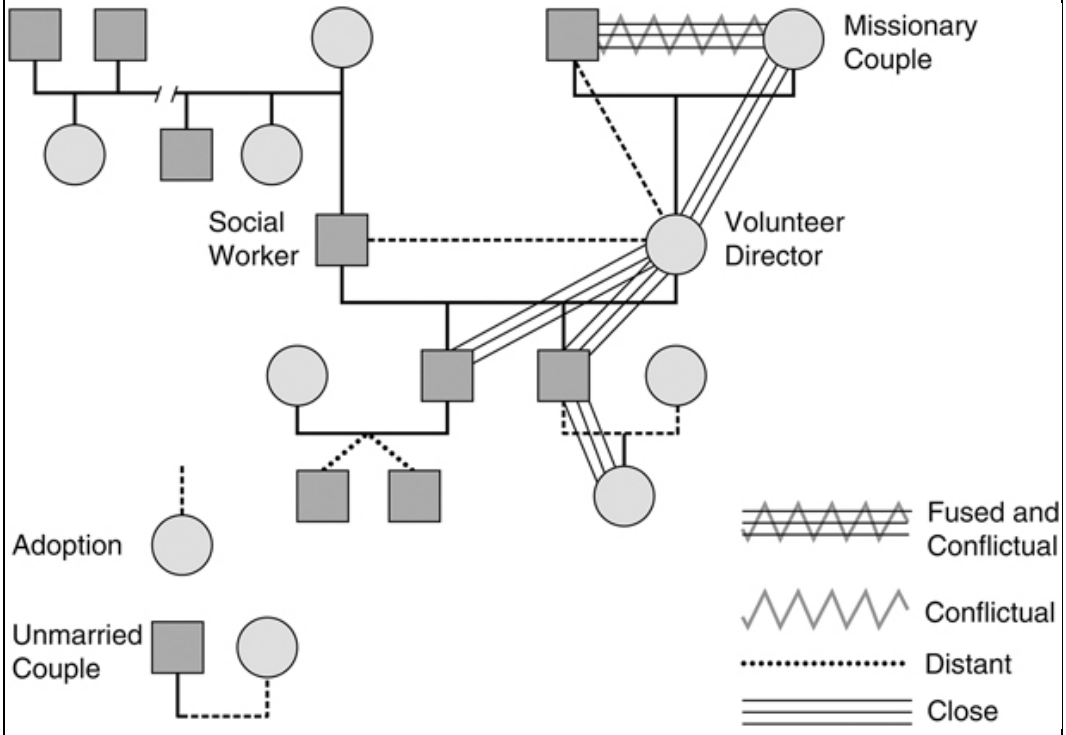

FIGURE 2.7 *A genogram depicting multigenerational systems.*

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We believe you may find it both insightful and helpful to create your own family genogram that represents the main features of your own family. Your job is to identify the main family features you want to understand and display on your own genogram. There are many free and fee-based genogram examples and templates online to give you ideas and help you design your family genogram: www.bing.com/images/search?

q=Free+Genogram+Template+for+Microsoft+Word&form=IARSLK&first=1.

In the end, the family of origin plays a significant role in creating and developing members' communication patterns and is tied closely to both the primary functions of cohesion and adaptability, as well as the secondary supporting functions we images, themes, boundaries, and biosocial issues. Taken together, all these factors contribute to creating a framework for examining and understanding the role of family communication.

BOX 2.8 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What helpful and destructive patterns have been transmitted to your own family members across generations?
2. Draw a family genogram that represents the relationships between your family members today. How would this genogram have been different five years ago, and what might it look like ten years from now?

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we highlighted the profound effects of communication on developing, living in, and altering family systems across the lifespan. We discussed how communication functions in a family system, focusing on (a) communication as a process, (b) communication as social construction of family relationships, (c) communication patterns and family effects, (d)

supporting functions shaping family communication, and (e) family of origin influences on family systems.

Key Words

Cohesion
Communication
Conformity orientation
Conversation orientation
Discourse-dependence
Family of origin
Family theme
Flexibility
Function
Genogram
Metacommunication
Schemas
Social construction

FLASHCARDS

is defined as the emotional bonding and closeness
that family members experience with each other

is a symbolic, transactional process of creating and sharing meanings

refers to the degree to which family communication stresses a climate of similarity of beliefs, values, and attitudes

references the degree to which all family members are encouraged to participate in unrestrained interaction about a wide range of topics

relationships that do not have well-developed cultural models to guide them

refers to the family or families in which a person is raised, generally considered to be the earliest and most powerful influence on personal development, and a primary source of individual and family identity and expectations

is a prominent pattern of feelings, motives, fantasies, and understandings grouped around a particular locus of concern in a family system

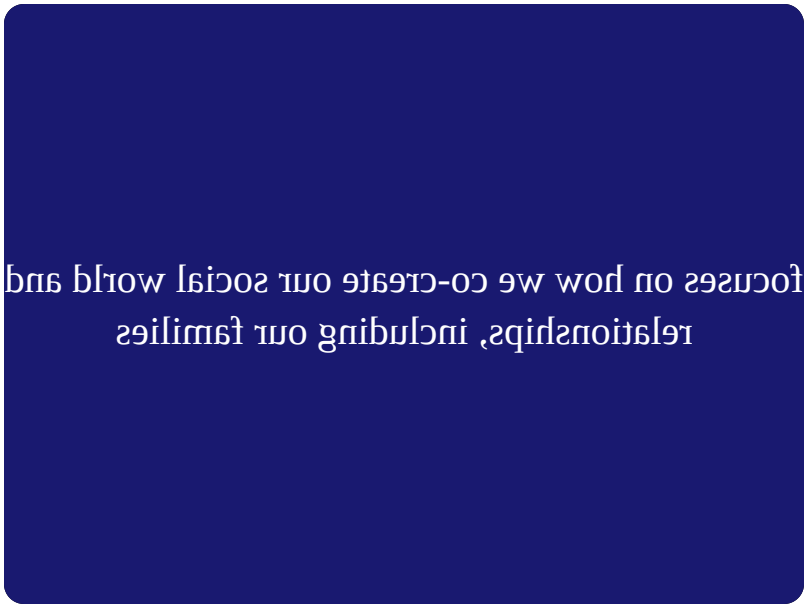
can be defined as the amount of adaptability and change in a family's roles, relationships, and rules

is something a system must do, or an operation it must perform, to establish family identity and enact family life

is a multigenerational map or model that visually depicts family relationships

occurs when people communicate about their communication, giving verbal and nonverbal indications about how messages should be interpreted

represent organized knowledge structures that individuals use to make sense of different phenomena.



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CHAPTER 3

Family Communication Theories

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BOX 3.1

What do family communication meta-theories help us understand about family functioning? Why do we need to know and use multiple family communication theories? What is the main purpose or goal for each of the five theories featured in this chapter? What are practical action steps and outcomes for each of the five theories? In this chapter, we offer you a set of practical theories to help you understand and more effectively communicate in your family systems. After reading this chapter, you will be able to

1. Articulate what a theory is and what it does.
2. Explain the main purpose of the five theories covered in this chapter.
3. Apply each theory to understand a challenge your family has faced.

4. Describe family strengths that would be encouraged when applying each theory.
5. Discuss a practical application of each theory.

CHILL OUT

Cash grew up with two brothers, Carl and Cam. All were star athletes in high school and college. Their family valued athletic achievement and held an elaborate “Jackson Family Olympics” each summer. After marrying Louisa, Cash went on to play minor league baseball, and they settled in Minneapolis. Now in his mid-thirties, Cash has shoulder and knee problems, has asthma, and has to watch his health.

Cash is very close to his brothers, who both live in L.A. Louisa loves Carl and Cam, but she has concerns when they get together. The brothers plan a summer vacation where they party hard and take part in risky sports. Cash needed knee surgery after last summer’s climbing trip, and he has had multiple asthma attacks. Cash calls and texts Louisa during these trips, but never includes details about the brothers’ activities. Louisa learns more from stories and photos that the brothers post online.

Before the most recent trip, all Cash told Louisa was that the brothers were going camping, but Louisa knew she wasn’t getting the whole story. Early in the trip, Cam posted beautiful photos and Cash texted her regularly. However, last night, Louisa did not hear from Cash, which was strange.

First thing in the morning, Louisa checked her social media. She noticed a posting from Cam saying he’d spent the night in the emergency room with his brother. Louisa just knew he was talking about Cash! Louisa grabbed her phone and tried to call and text Cash, but there was no response. She considered calling Cash’s parents but did not want to worry them. She finally reached Carl, who told her Cash had passed out the night before. The emergency room physician thought it was probably his asthma, put him on

oxygen, and kept him in the hospital overnight. Louisa was not sure if she was more scared or more furious. By this point, she was yelling and crying, “I cannot believe no one called me and I had to find out online!” Carl seemed perturbed: “Chill out, Louisa. None of us wanted to worry you until we had some definite answers. I’m on my way to the hospital now. I’ll call you when I know something.”

TOPICS OFF LIMITS

Eunjung, an international undergraduate student from Korea, is encountering ongoing surprises as she begins to make U.S. American friends in her dormitory. When Eunjung hears other students on her floor talking about their conversations with their mothers, she finds herself amazed by how open her floormates are about what is going on in their families and in their own lives. Growing up in a traditional Korean family, Eunjung was taught to respect the distance between a child and their parents, as well as the importance of saving face. Eunjung learned to avoid talking about personal and family matters with her Korean and American friends. Even though she is starting to feel closer to her roommate, Brianna, and other friends she is making on campus, Eunjung had not shared any personal secrets with them. When Brianna talked about struggles she was having in her chemistry class, Eunjung wanted to talk about *her* own challenges reading her books in English and writing all her class papers in English. However, Eunjung remained silent because her comments might reflect negatively on herself or her family.

Although Brianna and her friends talk about issues like a parent’s divorce or a sibling’s struggle with alcoholism, topics like these are off limits for Eunjung. In fact, sometimes it is hard to sit through her friends’ conversations because they just seem too personal. Eunjung is very uncomfortable hearing her floormates talk about their grades and test scores. In Korea, no member of the family would discuss academic performance with outsiders. Eunjung’s greatest surprise came when she

heard her friends say they talked about sex with their mothers. Since sexuality was seldom talked about in the Korean families she knew, Eunjung wondered what such a discussion would be like. When her mother calls, sometimes Eunjung will mention the topics her friends discuss, just to see how her mother will react. Usually, her mother tells Eunjung to stay out of those conversations.

In this chapter, we offer you a set of theories to help you understand family communication. First, we will start by considering what meta-theories and theories are, focusing on how we can move between and use these practical and useful tools (see Table 3.1). Second, we present five family communication theories that give us a breadth of approaches (adding these theories to family communication patterns theory that we presented in Chapter 2). We present multiple theories because of the reality of the many wonderful and challenging aspects of life in families require a toolchest of different ways of understanding life in family systems.

META-THEORIES AND THEORIES

In Chapters 1 and 2, we discussed three *meta-theoretical perspectives* that help us understand and explain family communication broadly (see Table 3.1). In Chapter 1, we introduced the *family systems* perspective to highlight the interconnected nature of family relationships and focus on communication between family members. In Chapter 2, we viewed family communication from two additional meta-theoretical perspectives: (a) communication as *social construction* and *discourse-dependence*, and (b) communication patterns that influence *family effects by predicting family functions and outcomes*. These three broad, meta-theoretical perspectives give us insights into how we communicate to create and guide family relationships.

In Chapter 1, we talked about meta-theories as broad perspectives, like an overhead light that illuminates more general principles of family communication. Although a more wide-ranging perspective is helpful, many times, we need to shine a more focused, directional light on something to see it more clearly. For example, in the first case study in this current chapter, we see expectations within Cash's and Louisa's family system regarding what to say or not say, and recognizing those expectations might help us understand how Louisa came to learn of her husband's hospitalization on social media. However, this general, "5,000-foot" view is not always sufficient to help us understand how families develop rules for revealing and concealing information or handle any privacy violations that might occur – that's why in Chapter 3, we present specific family communication theories.

TABLE 3.1 Family Communication Meta-Theories and Theories

Family Communication Meta-Theories		
Family Systems	Family as a complex system of interconnected relationships	Ch. 1
Social Construction: Discourse-Dependent Family Relationships	How families are co-created, maintained, and altered via communication and behaviors	Ch. 2
Communication Patterns and Processes: Effectual Approach	Communication patterns that influence family effects by predicting family functions and outcomes	Ch. 2
Family Communication Theories		
Communication Accommodation Theory	How family members construct a shared family identity via adjusting their communicative behavior during social interaction	Ch. 3

Family Communication Meta-Theories		
Communication Privacy Management Theory	How a boundary metaphor and privacy rules facilitate making choices about revealing or concealing private information	Ch. 3
Communication Theory of Identity	How people communicate to enact or perform the fluid nature of identity	Ch. 3
Communicated Narrative Sense-Making Theory	How the content and process of narratives and storytelling are communicated and function in family systems	Ch. 3
Family Communication Patterns Theory	How family members communicate and develop a shared social reality based upon family members' perceptions of agreement in attitudes, beliefs, and values	Ch. 2
Relational Dialectics Theory	How family members communicate and navigate discursive struggles; systems of meaning operating at the same time in family relationships	Ch. 3

A **theory** is "an organized set of statements that explains some phenomenon."[1] The function or purpose of a theory is to help make a phenomenon or process understandable.[2] A theory is a practical tool that functions like a lens on a camera or a filter on photo-editing software; use a different lens or filter and you see and understand things from a distinct vantage point while other things will fade into the background. Most often, a theory grows out of a group of studies that, when understood together, helps researchers *describe* and *explain* a phenomenon or process and, with some types of theories, also *predict* how a particular communication process may unfold.

There are many theories from the field of communication and its allied academic disciplines that provide different vantage points on family communication. In fact, one of your textbook authors, Dawn O. Braithwaite, and her colleagues recently published a book highlighting 29

different family communication theories coming from communication and disciplines like psychology, sociology, and family studies.[3] All of the meta-theories and family communication theories we include appear in the upper tier of this list as those used most often. We already talked about one of these theories, family communication patterns theory, in Chapter 2. Here in Chapter 3, we introduce you to five additional theories that influence research and will be helpful for you to develop your own framework for understanding and analyzing interactions in family systems: (a) communication accommodation theory, (b) communication privacy management theory, (c) communicated narrative sense-making theory, (d) communication theory of identity, and (e) relational dialectics theory.

COMMUNICATION ACCOMMODATION THEORY

You have likely encountered many situations in which you need to adapt your communication to particular family members. For example, you may talk more loudly with an older grandparent, use simple words so a young cousin can understand you, explain a longstanding family joke to a brother-in-law who recently joined the family, or avoid using slang with a family member who does not speak your native language. All these adjustments are addressed in communication accommodation theory (CAT), which helps us understand how family members attempt to construct a shared family identity via modifying their communication.[4] Scholars using CAT focus on how, when, and why we make communication adjustments, how others perceive these changes, and what the outcomes are of making adjustments.[5] Sometimes, you make these adjustments almost without thinking, whereas other times, you may give adjustments careful thought and planning.

Communication scholar Howard Giles first started studying the way people make communicative adjustments in the 1970s. He focused on issues like how we switch our language, accent, or dialect when talking with specific individuals or groups of people. For example, you likely use current slang with your friends and adapt your language when you talk with

a parent or grandparent. Over time, Giles developed a theory that he and other scholars applied to families, especially when trying to understand various aspects of a family's social identity, how we create our social identities based on the social groups to which we belong, and how we adapt our attitudes, behaviors, and communication.[6] For instance, in the second case at the start of this chapter, Eunjung demonstrates her Korean family's social identity by not sharing personal information with those outside of her family.

Using CAT, scholars also focus on intergroup relations, such as how families interact and navigate differences in multiethnic relationships,[7] in intergenerational relationships between grandparents and grandchildren,[8] or when a child becomes part of a stepfamily but still wants to maintain a relationship with their nonresidential parent's family.[9] In the example to follow, communication researcher Jordan Soliz tells the story of Anissa,[10] a Hispanic adolescent whose family moved away from her neighborhood, and the complexities of her intergroup identity that she starts to experience:

> While the girls from the old neighborhood had the same background as my mom's family – they had names like Ruiz, Chavez, Santoyo and I had grown up with them. However, as I got older, I started to feel a little out of place … I also noticed that the older we got, the more they spoke in Spanish to each other or used words and phrases that I didn't always understand. They didn't do this to exclude me. In fact, I remember Julia or maybe it was Valeria saying something like, "Oh, hey, someone explain what that means to Anissa," after a joke was made in Spanish. Although they said this to include me … this is my heritage, this is who I was – who I am. But, at that time, I felt out place.

CAT is useful for understanding interactions in a variety of intergroup situations, such as in interfaith families.[11] In one study, for example, scholars studied the family relationships of parents and their adult children when their children have different religious beliefs. The researchers applied

CAT to understand how families interact and handle differences that arise from practicing different faiths while trying to achieve or maintain family harmony.[12] Others described what happens in a family that has not been actively pursuing their religious faith when the son makes a religious conversion.[13] The other family members perceive that the converted son is now judging their behavior negatively, and the son perceives that his family is not very accepting of his newfound faith.

Convergence and Divergence

Using CAT is especially helpful to understand challenges that occur as family members make two types of adjustments: Family members may engage in **convergence** and adapt communication to be more similar to others, or they may engage in **divergence** and communicate in ways that highlight their differences with others. In the previous example, the family may use convergence and invite the newly converted son to say grace before a family dinner, even though they normally do not pray. On the other hand, members of the family may use divergence and emphasize their difference with the son by teasing him about being “too holy” for them. Family members may also use a maintenance strategy and not adjust their communication – for example, they might choose to tell the same slightly off-color stories and jokes they have always told, trying not to leave the son out of the usual banter of their family interactions. In their study of communication in interfaith families, one of your authors, researcher Colleen Warner and her co-researchers found that while religious differences often threaten family solidarity, when family members interact in such a way as to show that they understand and respect religious differences, shared family identity and family satisfaction tend to increase.[14]

Underaccommodating and Overaccommodating

Using CAT helps us understand how accommodation in family interactions may help family members overcome social identity differences to the extent they are able to support different perspectives and worldviews.[15] We can see how accommodating communication can be positive, and scholars suggest that it is often the case, but all of us have experienced situations when accommodation is more complex or does not work as we expect. Scholars working with CAT have shown that we may *overaccommodate* or *underaccommodate* our communication, with unpleasant results. For instance, when younger family members attempt to accommodate an older adult by talking more slowly, loudly, or simplifying language, it is easy to cross the line, overaccommodate, and use patronizing language (or create the false impression of being patronizing).[16] In this situation, we might hear a frustrated grandparent exclaim, "Hey, I am not deaf, you know!" or "Getting older does not mean I've lost my ability to think for myself!" In these situations, overaccommodating is unpleasant for the older adult and can negatively affect closeness between grandparent and grandchild.[17]

Quite often, overaccommodating communication occurs when we stereotype a particular group rather than make the effort to consider what is appropriate communication with an individual.[18] For example, a stepmother who enters a new marriage with little direct experience with adolescents might attempt to communicatively accommodate her new stepdaughter by playing hip-hop music and using words and phrases she heard adolescents use in the media, without taking the time to learn that her new stepdaughter favors country music, phrases like "y'all," and wearing cowboy boots. In this circumstance, employing stereotypes of what she thinks are typical teenagers will not help this new stepmother to gain the stepdaughter's trust or respect.

Underaccommodation can have similarly negative effects. In one study of stepchildren's communication with their nonresidential parent's extended family (i.e., grandparents, aunts, cousins), a researcher found that children often like that their nonresidential parent's family asks questions about the stepfamily and find this to be accommodating, as this demonstrates their

extended family members want to know about their well-being as they adjust to living in different households.[19] If the extended family overaccommodates and asks too many questions about the stepfamily, this might communicate that they do not trust the residential parent – or the child herself – to make sound judgments about how to live in this new family situation. Underaccommodating can also become problematic in these situations when asking no questions about the stepfamily communicates that the extended family is uncomfortable or does not care about the child.

Overall, CAT is an extremely useful theory for helping us understand how individuals interact in family systems characterized by intergroup differences. In general, using the theory can help us see the potential for using accommodative communication when helping family members understand and overcome social identity differences.[20] Although family members will not always accommodate as effectively or as appropriately as they might like, giving serious attention to intergroup similarities and differences, and making an effort to communicate and accommodate, can be very helpful for fostering satisfying family relationships.

BOX 3.2 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What is an example of when you or a family member have engaged in convergence or divergence? Overaccommodation or underaccommodation? What was the outcome?
2. How would CAT be most useful to help you and your family understand a challenge you've had and help you make effective choices about how to communicate in your family system?

COMMUNICATION PRIVACY MANAGEMENT THEORY

Every individual and family system has private information they expect to be shared only with certain persons inside or outside the family. Families have privacy orientations: Some families are very open with one another and those outside of the family, whereas others are much more closed.[21] Family members learn, usually by making mistakes, what information can be revealed and not, and to whom. Younger or new family members learn the rules through observation or from directions they receive from parents or other older members. Families continue to develop new privacy rules with one or more family members as events occur that affect the family. Think about different privacy rules in your own family – for instance, you might have been told, "What is said in the family stays in the family," "You can tell your family anything," or "Let's not tell Grandpa that your sister is getting a divorce."

Scholar Sandra Petronio developed communication privacy management theory (CPM), and placed communication at the core of understanding how family members negotiate private information, that is, what they believe they should reveal and/or conceal.[22] The theory was developed using a "boundary" metaphor to identify the border around private information. You can picture people talking with each other and each opening and closing a bubble around them as they selectively open and close boundaries in relation to the other people. CPM theory helps us understand how family members make choices about regulating private information using a family's system of privacy rules, which develop over time.

One of the cornerstones of CPM is that individuals and systems regard information as something that is owned and a person or members of the family system must decide if and when to open the boundary and make others co-owners of the information.[23] You likely have information about your romantic relationship that "belongs" to you and your partner, and you do not share it with others. Families also have information they own and may establish rules about, such as talking about getting a large inheritance

or someone experiencing mental illness in the family. Information may be owned by a whole family, a subset of family members, or an individual. Louisa, from the first case at the beginning of this chapter, believed that, as Cash's wife, she was entitled to information about Cash being in the hospital, and was very upset when no one let her know what had happened.

Privacy boundaries are variously permeable, or flexible, meaning that people open and close boundaries such that information may flow freely back and forth, only in one direction, or not at all.[24] When children are young, information about their health and bodies flows one way as parents keep track of their children's eating habits, bedtime, and health. At the same time, most parents will not share information about their own health, sex life, or finances with their children. As children age, more of their own personal information becomes private, and the privacy boundary becomes less permeable, as little information flows from children to parent. Later in life, the adult child may ask their elderly parent if they are eating well and how their visit with the physician went. Thus, privacy boundaries change over time as circumstances lead members to include or exclude others from certain information. How we negotiate and manage privacy boundaries is a complex and ever-changing process that addresses the tension between the need to be connected to family members and the desire to retain a sense of independence from them.[25]

Petronio identified three concepts that guide the privacy rule management process: (a) boundary rule formation and usage, (b) boundary rule coordination, and (c) boundary turbulence.[26] We'll talk about each of these to follow.

Boundary Rule Formation and Usage

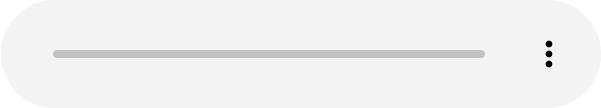
First, we develop individual and family system **boundary access rules** that guide decisions about issues such as: Should we reveal to this particular person? How much should be said? When should information be revealed? What might be the potential short-term or long-term implications of the disclosure? Considering the questions we just posed, imagine you received

a big promotion at work within days of a sibling being laid off from their job. Would you tell your sibling your news? When would you tell them? What might be the implication of telling and not telling?

Sometimes we may make boundary access rules we'd like to follow, but additional privacy rules may be triggered by new events. For example, a family may not talk about finances openly with children, however, a significant drop in income may require telling children about financial problems to help frame the news as to why their parents cannot afford to support a child's request for funds. In one study, women experiencing infertility reported that they needed to open their privacy boundaries more than normal and talk about something that felt very private, when these topics would normally be off limits to anyone but their partner.[27] Families members also need to think about how to socialize children and new members into the privacy rules of the family.[28] For example, a woman may let her fiancé know that it would be inappropriate to talk about their family's political beliefs on social media when this would be an open topic in the person's own family of origin.

Boundary Rule Coordination

Second, information may be co-owned by dyads, small groups, or entire families. Once an individual shares their private information with another person, that information is now co-owned.[29] When that happens, the co-owners may explicitly or implicitly coordinate their private boundaries. Co-owners of information may make explicit rules as to how that information may be shared with others. For example, a grandfather sternly tells his grandchild they are not to reveal that he was in prison in his 20s. Sometimes the person disclosing will assume the other person understands how to handle the private information. We have all probably made this assumption and been wrong. Thus, rules regarding co-ownership tend to be more effective when the need for privacy is explicitly stated and the ties between parties are strong.



▶ Scripts

Boundary Turbulence

Third, when privacy boundaries have not been coordinated properly and/or privacy rules are violated, **boundary turbulence** arises, and adjustments to privacy rules are needed to prevent future privacy breakdowns.[30] Boundary turbulence can happen a number of different ways, for example, sometimes people misunderstand that one party believes information should be kept private. We may believe that we have an obligation to reveal, for example, if we believe an adolescent is misusing social media.[31] People may learn another person's private information by accident, placing the recipient in a privacy dilemma. For instance, a teenager may find a text or e-mail indicating that a parent is having an affair.

We hope you have gleaned from the discussion of CPM theory that the decision to reveal and conceal information is complex, and there are rarely easy answers. Developing, coordinating, and altering boundary rules is an ongoing task in a family, and boundary turbulence can be terribly challenging for subsets of the family or the entire family system. CPM theory is very valuable and has important implications for every stage of family life since family members are continually faced with making decisions about revealing and concealing information, and these decisions are central to family well-being.

BOX 3.3 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What is an example of a boundary rule in your family? How did you learn this was a rule?
2. How well does your family coordinate boundary rules? When has poor coordination resulted in boundary turbulence?
3. How would CPM be most useful to help you and your family understand a challenge you've had, and help you make effective choices about how to communicate in your family system?

COMMUNICATED NARRATIVE SENSE-MAKING THEORY

Family stories are central to family identity, as they both affect and reflect our family's reality.[32] Family members tell stories to make sense of their worlds, construct and alter their own individual and collective identities, cope with stress and loss, and help others become part of their lives. Family narrative scholars focus on stories that recount meaningful experiences, such as the birth of a child, first confessing love for a partner, or discovering a beloved uncle has Alzheimer's disease.

Narrative scholars focus on the rich meanings reflected in relationship and family narratives and stories[33] and the patterned nature of family narratives.[34] Through stories, families are both recounting and accounting for events.[35] **Recounting** chronicles a family's view of their history and is a retelling of memories. **Accounting** includes explanations or reasons for other people's behaviors or situations. For instance, the story a parent tells about the day of a child's birth is a recounting story, whereas the story a grandfather tells of living through unemployment may account for their reluctance to spend money today. Think about the first case involving Cash and Louisa. We can better understand the actions of Cash and his brothers when we pay attention to them retelling stories of the "Jackson Family Olympics." Further, knowing that those stories are told and retold helps us

better understand the implications for Cash and Louisa's marriage because the Jackson family narratives account for, at least in part, the brothers' risky sports behavior.

Family researchers use different narrative theories to explore how families construct and use stories. For example, Kristen Langellier's and Eric Peterson's narrative performance theory is centered in the social construction meta-theory and focuses on stories as one way of co-constructing family, or "doing family."[36] The theorists focus on creating meanings and "performance" of the family inside and outside the family, adopting a critical framework to understand "how family storytelling is embodied and situated in history and culture."[37] It is a critical theory because of the focus on family expectations and rules that are inherently tied to power. For example, how does something become a family story (what is legitimated or critiqued), who gets to tell the story, or judge whether the story told is correct?

Take a moment to think of the different family stories your family has told and retold during your lifetime. Think about why these narratives are important for understanding who you are as an individual and your family as a whole system. For example, one young woman adopted from China recalled:

> Every year on the anniversary of my adoption, my family tells the story of my "Gotcha Day" when I met my parents. Mom and Dad also tell the story of when my photo came in the mail, and they bring out the picture of a little Chinese baby face peeking out from a too-big jacket and knitted cap.

We can envision different narratives of adopted children and parents in the "Family Portrait" of family scholar Dr. Haley Kranstuber Horstman:

BOX 3.4 FAMILY PORTRAIT: DR. HALEY KRANSTUBER HORSTMAN, UNIVERSITY OF

MISSOURI

Dr. Horstman's website: https://communication.missouri.edu/people/horstman

What drew you to study family communication?

I credit my mom, Cheryl Kranstuber, for teaching me to be curious about people and their communication in family and interpersonal relationships. Dr. Ann Bainbridge Frymier showed me how to make that curiosity systematic through social science research, and Dr. Stephanie Rollie first introduced me to research in family communication, particularly in adoptive families, and narratives. I am grateful to these and other brilliant women (including the authors of this book) for showing me that my curiosity about family relationships can be a fulfilling career!

What are your main areas of family scholarship?

I study how family members and romantic partners communicate to make sense of their adversity and diversity. Adverse experiences I have studied include women's health issues (e.g., miscarriage and

pregnancy) and intergenerational trauma and resilience. In my work on diverse family experiences, I focus primarily on communication in families formed through adoption and foster care.

How has your own family influenced what you teach and study?

I was adopted by my parents as an infant, which predisposed me to be curious about issues in adoptive families. I wondered about communication in other closed adoptive families, where information about biological parents is not shared, as well as those navigating the new waters of open adoptions. Given that women's health and fertility issues are linked to adoption, being adopted also made me keenly aware of the impact of these issues on women and their families.

How can family communication students use your research in their own family life?

Through my research, I show the power of creating and telling stories about your life. Specifically, when trying to cope with a difficult experience, "storying" it and telling that story helps you to cope with your experience as well as build relationships with those supporting you.

Narrative researchers focus on the interpretations families construct for their lived experiences and the meanings and significance family members assign to different moments and events.[38] We now turn to one particular narrative theory that is very helpful for family communication students and scholars: communicated narrative sense-making (CNSM) theory. This theory was developed by family communication scholar Jody Koenig Kellas and her colleagues. As Koenig Kellas described, the main focus of this theory is to "shed light on the *communicated* content, process, and functions of storytelling, as they help to explain and are explained by

individual and relational health and well-being."[39] CNSM theory is useful because it focuses not just on the existence of family narratives (such as the "Jackson Family Olympics"), but on *how* narratives are communicated and function in family systems. This is important since in their research scholars have found a strong association between narrative sense-making, and individual and family physical health, relational health, and well-being.[40] Here, we will briefly highlight two aspects of CNSM theory: (a) retrospective storytelling and (b) interactional storytelling. As we describe findings about storytelling, think about how you might apply these findings to narrative sense-making in your own family life.

First, starting with our earliest memories, we have heard family members take part in retrospective storytelling (after the event) and we have participated in storytelling ourselves.[41] For instance, your family may tell the story of family hardships of your ancestors immigrating to this country or a time your family moved across country. Scholars using CNSM theory focus on both the *process* of hearing and telling retrospective (or past) family stories, and the *content* of those stories. For example, in one study, Koenig Kellas had three members from the same family in her lab at the same time, and asked them to tell family stories together so she could better understand how family storytelling reflects and affects family identity.[42] Koenig Kellas studied the themes of the stories, how the stories were framed (e.g., Did they present the family members as more separate or did they reflect a collective identity?), the individuals' storytelling behaviors (e.g., How involved were different family members in telling the story? Did they take turns?), and how much the family saw itself as a "storytelling family."

Koenig Kellas also found that telling stories that focused on what the family accomplished together, rather than focusing on stressful events, was one factor that highlighted the collective nature of the family or family "we-ness." Families' "we-ness" was also demonstrated by how the family actually told the story together. Families with a strong collective identity took turns in telling the story and involved each other in the story. These

behaviors were positively correlated with higher levels of family satisfaction and family functioning. Overall, using CNSM theory shows us that the content of family stories reveals important things about the family. For instance, telling stories framed more positively is related to the health and well-being of both the individual family members and the family system as a whole.

Second, Koenig Kellas stressed the importance of *interactional storytelling* in families, looking at how families tell stories together and the effects of how they tell stories.[43] For instance, Koenig Kellas and colleague April Trees studied families who were asked to tell stories about difficult or stressful family events.[44] They found that the process of group storytelling reflected family health and well-being. The stories of healthy families exhibited these characteristics: (a) more complete stories, (b) more turn-taking, (c) involving the different family members who were present, and (d) demonstrating that they had taken one another's perspectives. CNSM theory helps us understand more coherent family stories and collective sense-making versus family stories that are less complete and reflect individual sense-making. The theory highlights the value of **communicated perspective-taking**, which occurs when people demonstrate that they are paying attention to, and confirm that they understand, the viewpoints of family members telling the story. Over a series of studies, Koenig Kellas and her colleagues found that families who demonstrated higher levels of perspective-taking and coherence in their storytelling (i.e., the story was organized and made sense to hearers) were more likely to have higher family cohesion and adaptability and to see their family as supportive. These families also experienced better relational health and well-being.

As a narrative theory, CNSM helps us see the value in identifying family problems that are reflected in storytelling and that help professionals create family interventions to address different challenges. For example, Koenig Kellas and her colleagues have used results from a study on family communication and cancer stories to create training modules for families who are experiencing cancer, showing them how to take a shared, communal approach to coping with cancer.[45]

BOX 3.5 FAMILY MATTERS: NARRATIVES OF HOW CO-MOTHERS TELL AND UNDERSTAND THE STORY OF HOW THEIR FAMILY CAME TO BE

Family communication scholars Elizabeth Suter, Jody Koenig Kellas, Stephanie Webb, and Jordan Allen used the theory of communicated narrative sense-making to study the experiences of families headed by lesbian women, what they refer to as "co-mothers." As discourse-dependent families, co-mothers rely primarily on narratives, especially on the family's beginnings, to create their family. Ten same-sex couples were interviewed together and responded to the following prompt: "Tell me the story of how your family came to be." The researchers engaged in a qualitative analysis of the themes of the co-mothers' family origin stories.

In their analysis, the research team identified three themes. In the first theme, "becoming a family as normal," the co-mothers wove a story that highlighted how their family was like all other families and progressed like all other families, from coupling, to desiring children, to becoming parents. In the second theme, "becoming a family as negotiation," the co-mothers reflected on negotiations the women undertook to become a family because their family form is considered different. The women established "a new fairytale" and related stories of finding true love in a same-sex relationship, and they negotiated times of difficulty and loss because they could not biologically create a child together. In the third theme, "becoming a family as normalization," the co-mothers addressed the efforts they undertook to deal with negative comments from those outside the family, including former spouses and strangers who judged them negatively. In these narratives, the co-mothers stressed their congruency with the same commitments and values they share with other family types.

Although same-sex families may be characterized by some as "abnormal," through their narratives, these co-mothers focused on how their families are normal by explaining the experiences, commitments, and values they share with all families, particularly in terms of how they met and fell in love and fulfilled their desires to be parents together. Importantly, these women identified their children as the most important audience for their family story, further demonstrating that how narratives function to create and sustain family identity matters.

For further reading, see Suter, E. A., Koenig Kellas, J., Webb, S. K., & Allen, J. A. (2016). A tale of two mommies: (Re)storying family of origin narratives. *Journal of Family Communication, 16*(4), 303–317.

This study provides one example of how family narrative scholars are seeking to help families reframe different kinds of stress and trauma and cope more effectively. Communication scholar Megan Cardwell and colleagues also engaged CNSM theory, along with a critical race perspective, to understand storytelling and intergenerational racial trauma.[46] Across a breadth of family contexts, CNSM theory is very helpful for those wanting to better understand this family function and how family narratives both affect and reflect family well-being.

BOX 3.6 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. In CNSM theory, what positive outcomes occur when a family demonstrates communicated perspective-taking? How has this played out in stories your family tells?

2. How would CNSM theory be most useful to help you and your family understand a challenge you've had and help you make effective choices about how to communicate in your family system?

COMMUNICATION THEORY OF IDENTITY

People in family systems communicate and collaborate to co-create family, experience life, navigate both satisfying and stressful times, and navigate both expected and unexpected change. One reason we interact is to create and communicate identity inside and outside the family system, including for ourselves.[47] In Chapter 2, we highlighted the broad meta-theoretical perspective of social construction that helps us stress that relationships and identity are created in communication with others. Communication scholar Leslie Baxter explained that it makes the most sense to think about "relationships in communication" (rather than communication in relationships), as we consider how families, larger social collectives, and individual selves are both made and re-made in interaction.[48]

Starting with questions that help us understand how people think about "Who am I?", communication researcher Michael Hecht created the communication theory of identity (CTI) to center identity in interaction in the family system.[49] In a series of studies and essays, Hecht and colleagues started thinking about identity as communication and communication as identity.[50] Hecht came to realize that we can understand identities only if we focus on each of us having *multiple identities*. If you go back to how your authors introduced themselves as family members in Chapter 1, you can see clues, for example, Dawn emphasized herself as an adopted person, stepdaughter, spouse, and retired person. Colleen emphasized herself as a biological daughter, adoptive mother, and ex-spouse/co-parent. If you asked Dawn and Colleen to answer the question "Who am I?", they might

naturally include some of these family identities. Other personal identities would likely pop out too, for example, Dawn might highlight she is a rabid baseball fan and what is called a friend-keeper – a person who connects friends together within a social network. She keeps current contact lists of several past groups (e.g., her former church, a college musical group), sends out news, and helps plan reunions. Colleen might highlight that she is a weaver and crocheter who makes gifts for her loved ones, a singer who is part of several community choirs, and a gatherer who loves a crowded table.

Identity Layers

CTI developed around how identity is co-created and negotiated through four interdependent layers: (a) personal, (b) relational, (c) enacted, and (d) communal.[51] First, when we focus on the *personal layer of identity*, we clue into individual definitions of the self, answering that "Who am I?" question (what Hecht described as personal labels or hashtags).[52] It is also important to note that this personal layer of identity exists within specific social contexts. For example, a physician who was a college volleyball star in the 1990s thinks of herself as tall. Well, she is 6'2" and in everyday life and in volleyball when she played, she is tall for a female. However, by today's standards in college volleyball, she would be average or below average when playing against women who are 6'6" to 6'10".

Second, when we focus on the *relational layer of identity*, we clue into the ways identities are negotiated and the expectations that develop in connection with others.[53] People understand this layer when paying attention to what they perceive others expect and act on this identity in relationship roles, for instance, as a grandparent, teacher, lesbian mother, or immigrant. For example, one person we know recently became a grandmother. As she waited for the baby to come, she thought about what kind of grandma she wanted to be and seen as by others, and even what she wanted to be called. She did not want to be the same kind of "old lady" she perceived her mother and grandmother to be and decided she wanted to be a

fun and lively grandma, choosing her grandma name as "Zippy." The relational layer is reflected by the others in our lives and also how we think about ourselves. In fact, when Zippy's friends heard about her grandma identity, they remarked on how perfectly this described and suited her.

Third, when we focus on the *enacted layer of identity*, we focus in on how identity is expressed in what people do and say (verbal and nonverbal messages) to communicate who they are.[54] For instance, parents who have had a child die may decide to communicate their identity as bereaved parents by wearing an angel pin on their clothing or including their departed children's name on a holiday card.

Fourth, when we focus on the *communal layer of identity*, we clue into group identities that spring from the culture. This identity layer developed from our membership in churches, schools, teams, organizations, political parties, and the like. All of these groups have a variety of social identities from which we are connected. These communal identities may take on different levels of prominence in your life, for example, as a family who volunteers at a local food bank or celebrates your ethnic heritage.

If you did indeed make note of your own personal, relational, enacted, and communal identities as you were reading about each layer, you likely already understand that these *four identity layers are rarely separate and, in fact, they shape and influence each other*,[55] what researchers refer to as "interpenetrating."[56] Researchers often divide up the identity layers to study them, even though we understand the layers are interrelated. In our real lives, we may separate the layers when one or more of the layers seems to take precedence, even though we understand all four layers are always in operation.

Identity Gaps

As we pay attention to how these four identity layers interact and validate one another, we also realize this does not always happen. In this situation, *identity gaps* form, which are "inconsistencies between any of the layers of your identity, which causes tension."[57] This discrepancy prompts a change

in behavior or relationships as one attempts to resolve or minimize the gap. For example, several members of one family developed a wine tasting group for family members. However, this family system needed to rethink the wine tasting group activity when they realized a family member was abusing alcohol. When there are identity gaps, family members face the need to adjust and renegotiate identity layers.

We can see how a focus on intersecting and changing identity layers helps us explain adjustments one family made as their parents aged. The family patriarch always took the leading role as the family leader and decision-maker. The parents' four adult sons – two physicians, an attorney, and a farmer – always got along well, however, they lived in different states and had independent lives. The father and mother are now in their late 90s, and the sons have had to learn to work together to make decisions concerning their parents' living situation, health care, and finances. The oldest son has always enacted a personal layer of identity as the one who took the lead among the brothers, and he was bolstered in this role with his expertise as a doctor. When the parents were more independent, his personal and relational levels of identity seemed to work out smoothly for the brothers.

However, as the parents have become increasingly frail, the four brothers have experienced identity gaps and are learning to communicate and coordinate in new ways. The youngest son and his spouse, who built living quarters on their property for the parents, took on the responsibility for day-to-day care and a key role in managing the family finances as an attorney. The oldest brother, living 1500 miles away, began to defer to son #2, also a doctor, who lives closer to the parents, and often attends medical appointments. Over time, the sons and their wives have learned to communicate and manage identity gaps as the parents have become more frail, working out what it means for them to be a caring and supportive family.

CTI is a very practical theory to understand the role of communication concerning how family members interact and negotiate intersecting identity layers when changes and challenges happen, especially when there are

identity gaps between what family members expect of/for themselves and others. The true value of CTI theory is helping members of the family system understand and attempt to make the most useful and functional communicative choices as needed. This is important, especially when there are multiple identity gaps and/or family members disagree on identity layers and what members of the family should do and say at any given time.[58] For example, in one study, people who are transgender navigated identity gaps in how they now create and express their identity, especially when they are not understood or accepted by others. They may use strategies such as disengaging from the relationship or passing (that is, not revealing their identity).[59]

Using CTI, we can better understand and help families cope with a dual role of communication, both to influence identity and to negotiate the different identity layers and gaps that are incongruent.[60] In addition, Hecht also suggested the importance of understanding when identity gaps might create distress in the family.[61] As with all family communication we discuss in this book, families are always in a state of change and will need to continually navigate identity for individuals, relationships, and the whole family system.

BOX 3.7 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What is an identity gap? When have you experienced an identity gap in your family system? What was the outcome?
2. How would CTI be most useful in helping you and your family understand a challenge you've had and with making effective choices about how to communicate in your family system?

RELATIONAL DIALECTICS THEORY

Family relationships don't stay in one place; they are constantly in process, sometimes joyful, at other times difficult, and always complex. Communication scholar Leslie Baxter was central in developing the relational dialectics theory (RDT) that highlights the struggles between different **discourses**, which are systems of meaning operating at the same time in family relationships.[62] For example, in the first case, Louisa is struggling with wanting closeness with her husband, Cash, and to help keep him safe, while at the same time wanting him to have a close relationship with his brothers and enjoy his life and freedom. You can imagine conversations as Cash tries to convince her to relax and trust his judgment, which given the history of these trips with his brothers, makes her want to hold on even tighter. You can also imagine how the push and pull between the couple's connection with one another and the desire for independence emerges from the struggle of different, often opposing discourses. What does this mean? As does this couple, all of us experience situations when different discourses guiding our relational lives contradict each other. It is not that any of these discourses about family are wrong or are more important than the others; rather, it is simply that relational parties will understand and prioritize these discourses differently at separate times. These are the types of struggles and contradictions on which RDT was built.

RDT grew from the writings of social theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who viewed social life as an open dialogue characterized by multiple systems of meaning or discourses that guide and influence our interactions and relationships with others.[63] For instance, communication scholar Meredith Harrigan interviewed parents who adopted children who looked different than they did (e.g., international and/or interracial adoptions) to understand the different discourses parents use to understand and talk about their adopted children.[64] She found that the adoptive parents viewed and talked about their adopted children as both similar and different than children in

biological families. Her work is one of many examples that demonstrate the utility of RDT in helping us frame how family members communicate and manage these contradictions.

Discursive Struggles

When we put the RDT lens on our camera, we are able to focus on life in terms of contradictions that we experience in our relationship with others, including our families.[65] When you experience contradiction, you might think that family members should figure out which of the discourses are "right" and just get rid of the contradiction. However, you likely already know this does not work. When you look at the different discourses we highlighted for Louisa and Cash, you realize that each has merit. Rather than try to balance or resolve dialectical contradictions, RDT helps us to see how family members navigate and figure out how to perhaps improve but ultimately live with multiple and sometimes competing perspectives, what Baxter calls **discursive struggles**.[66] Using the term "discursive" highlights the role of communication in how these discourses play out and actions we take to try and manage challenges over meaning. You can see evidence of discursive struggles in your own family relationships as you and your family members grapple with questions such as: How do we stay involved in each other's lives without smothering or interfering? What information about the family is okay and not okay to tell those outside of the family? How do we handle all the changes of moving to a new city while maintaining a sense of normalcy? Each of these questions potentially involves communicating to navigate contradictions. This is not necessarily bad or to be avoided, and one choice is not always better than the others.

The different discursive struggles we experience come from both the culture in which we live and from interaction in our relationships, or what Baxter called *distal* and *proximal* discourses.[67] You can think about distal as struggles that spring from the culture (distal) and those that come from the relationship (proximal). Imagine the experience of a child who knows her father as heterosexual, but at some point, the father informs her that he is

gay. This is what communication scholar Diana Breshears studied, focusing on how the child and father must navigate some cultural (distal) discourses condemning homosexuality, which the child may be hearing from religious leaders, the media, and other members of her family. At the same time, daughter and father are very close, and the daughter notes that the father now seems more comfortable and open, but these distal discursive struggles do affect their relationship and how they communicate (proximal). RDT helps us understand how both daughter and father negotiate these competing cultural and relational-based discourses in their own relationship and in their interactions with others.[68]

Communication researchers have studied a variety of discursive struggles that appear in different family relationships. As you read about these, think about whether any or all of these help you better understand your own family experience. Earlier dialectical scholars identified contradictions in the form of *dialectical pairs*, in particular three pairs that cover a large variety of situations of how family members interact and manage (a) autonomy–connection, (b) openness–closedness, and (c) predictability–novelty.[69]

First, the common struggle in almost all relationships revolves around issues of *autonomy and connection* that highlights how dependent and independent we are in relation to others in the family. For example, a parent and young adult daughter may struggle with issues of autonomy and connection when the daughter moves home after college,[70] and parents may believe they should have input into her comings and goings since she is living in their house. Likewise, issues of autonomy and connection need to be renegotiated when an interfaith family needs to make choices about where they attend religious services, which may connect them to one set of in-laws and disconnect them from the other side of the family.

Second, the contradiction of *openness and closedness* refers to family members' struggles over needs to be expressive and private at the same time. For example, Baxter and her colleagues found that stepchildren said they wanted their stepparents to be open about their expectations, but at the same time, were clear the stepkids often did not want to hear what the

stepparent had to say.[71] Third, the contradiction of *predictability and novelty* refers to family members' struggles regarding a desire for stability and a competing need for excitement and change. In your own family, cherished rituals like holidays or birthdays are probably comforting because you can count on what will happen. At the same time, if this year you may want to shake it up and do something completely different, which may upset your family members.

Notice that these three pairs are written as both/and (openness *and* closedness) rather than either/or. This reminds us that these contradictions are always there. There will be times we barely notice them, and times when there are struggles. As an example, one married couple worked together for years and told each other virtually everything they experienced at work. However, when one of the partners became the supervisor, they found that something predictable, coming home and talking about work, was no longer possible, especially when the topic involved people from the workplace. It took some trial and error for this couple to figure out what they could do and say and not.

Interplay of Contradictions

You may have noticed that these different discursive or dialectical struggles are more complex than you initially realized. In fact, contradictions also are in *interplay* with one another.[72] For instance, looking at the last example of the workplace, this struggle over predictability also involved choices about openness and closedness. Both partners felt that, when they could not talk about some workplace issues, they lost their best source of information and support, and they often turned to other professional friends for advice or when they needed to blow off steam. Most often these contradictions co-occur. Think about situations in your own family that involve multiple contradictions at once.

Taking a Critical Turn

RDT theorist Leslie Baxter makes it clear that the theory would be limited if focusing on just these contradiction pairs. Baxter and others have more recently broadened RDT to take a critical perspective,[73] which means paying close attention to power and "discursive inequality" as families navigate power in relationships. This is important as many discourses of our relational lives are not valued equally.[74] Some discourses occupy a central position, whereas others are pushed toward the margins.[75]

Referencing the earlier study by Diana Breshears, we discussed how a child whose father came out as gay navigated a discourse of acceptance and love for a parent while at the same time coping with extended family members who negatively judged the father. The daughter finds her acceptance of her parent questioned and pushed to the margins by members of the extended family who hold conservative religious beliefs. The child feels powerless about how to respond to a beloved grandparent who criticizes their father. In another study, communication scholars interviewed people who had been part of the foster care system as children. The researchers identified competing discourses over power as children had to navigate their relationship with foster parents and those involved with the foster system. Foster children experienced foster care as both good and harmful – working for their interests at the same time experiencing the system as broken. You can imagine the challenges of these competing discourses for foster children as they are wanting to find connection in their foster families, and at the same time, staying distant to avoid disappointment and hurt.[76]

Strategies to Navigate Dialectical Struggles

Although dialectical struggles are ongoing, partners or family members make efforts to communicate and navigate the contractions by using different strategies. We discuss three strategies here: (a) selection, (b) segmentation, and (c) reframing.[77] First, **selection** involves making choices between contradictions; choosing to focus on one side of an opposing tension and, as much as possible, ignoring the other end. A couple decided

to cohabit and have not yet told their families, who they think will disapprove. They make a choice to select distance (ignoring connection) and closedness (ignoring openness) until they decide to announce their decision. For example, they are finding excuses not to get together with family and have planned overseas travel for the holidays. They also agreed not to post information or photos of their new apartment on social media platforms their family members also use.

Second, **segmentation** involves downplaying one domain in one situation and stressing it in another. For example, after opening a family business, a family started feeling like their personal relationships as family members were suffering. They employed segmentation, and unless they had a business emergency, they agreed not to talk about the business at family gatherings on weekends or holidays. Third, **reframing** involves thinking differently about the dialectical struggles to keep the elements from becoming opposites. For example, an athletically inclined father disapproved of his son's video gaming and wished his son would run, swim, or play basketball like dad and other siblings did. This started driving a wedge between father and son, and they were spending little time together. They finally talked it over and decided to reframe video gaming as a sport that father and son could both share. They planned times to play together and soon started finding other interests in common.

Think about your own discursive struggles within your family. How can you interact and best use your understanding of dialectical struggles and the different strategies to navigate contradictions? What other strategies might you and your family create? You might wonder why we don't confront dialectical struggles in our relationships, resolve them, and be done with it. Well, families navigate ongoing struggles throughout the life of the relationship and within constant changes that happen over time. When you think about it, most of the discursive struggles are not resolved. For example, the couple who waited to tell their families they are cohabiting will likely find additional topics they will want to avoid with family, for instance, "OK, so we understand this living together thing. When are you two going to get engaged?"

Using RDT theory helps us understand and cope with the fact that family relationships are an ongoing process of contradiction that are always in flux as we create and recreate meanings in interaction. RDT is useful because it helps us understand and negotiate relationships as the complex, messy, and beautiful entities they are. It also helps us to understand and appreciate the central role of communication in the ongoing process of co-creating and navigating ever-changing family relationships.

BOX 3.8 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. Give an example where you have experienced a discursive struggle in your family system. Which of the three dialectical pairs help explain the crux of the dialectical struggle you experienced? (It might be one, two, or all three of the pairs or another pair you create to describe what is happening.)
2. Discursive struggles can emerge at the relational (proximal) and cultural (distal) levels. How might you explain this idea using your examples in question 1? How might you use the three strategies to manage the struggles?
3. How would RDT theory be most useful to help you and your family understand a challenge you've had and help you make effective choices about how to communicate in your family system?

CONCLUSION

In Chapters 1, 2, and 3, we have presented three meta-theories and six family communication theories that help us describe, explain, and predict interaction in family systems (review Table 3.1 for the list). You will find other theories mentioned in this book; some from family communication and others from disciplines such as sociology, psychology, women's and gender studies, ethnic studies, and family studies. We believe you will find these meta-theoretical perspectives and theories helpful in understanding communication in your own family and to make the best choices possible. Different theories will be helpful to you and your family in various situations. Indeed, these theories are meant to be practical as they will help you take a new vantage point with the goal of finding the most workable and helpful ways to communicate in ever-changing circumstances.

Key Words

Accounting
Boundary access rules
Boundary turbulence
Communicated perspective-taking
Convergence
Discourses
Discursive struggles
Divergence
Recounting
Reframing
Segmentation
Selection
Theory

FLASHCARDS

includes explanations or reasons for other people's behaviors or situations.

that guide decisions about issues such as: Should we reveal to this particular person? How much should be said? When should information be revealed? What might be the potential short-term or long-term implications of the disclosure?

happens when privacy boundaries have not been coordinated properly and/or privacy rules are violated

which occurs when people demonstrate that they are paying attention to, and confirm that they understand, the viewpoints of family members telling the story

adapt communication to be more similar to others

which are systems of meaning operating at the same time in family relationships

living with multiple and sometimes competing perspectives

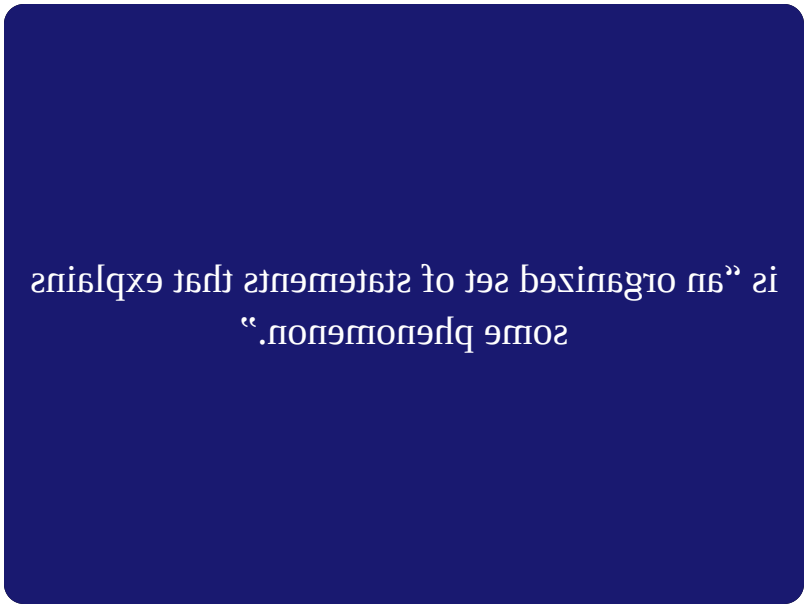
communicating in ways that highlight their differences with others

chronicles a family's view of their history and is a retelling of memories

involves thinking differently about the dialectical struggles to keep the elements from becoming opposites

involves downplaying one domain in one situation and stressing it in another

involves making choices between contradictions; choosing to focus on one end of an opposing tension and, as much as possible, ignoring the other end



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CHAPTER 4

Communication and Family Development

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BOX 4.1

Families experience many changes over time, as individuals grow, mature, and adapt throughout their lifespan. How do these individual changes shape family relationships, and how do family relationships shape how individuals experience these changes? How do assumptions about the family shape expectations about the timing and order of major life changes such as marriage and becoming a parent? In this chapter, we cover family communication across different stages of the lifespan with a greater focus on how family members interact and co-create relational meanings. After reading this chapter, you will be able to

1. Identify communication processes relevant to developmental stages from prenatal through adulthood.
2. Critique developmental models that suggest a “normal” way individuals and families grow.
3. Apply a life-course perspective to family development to explain how individual, generational, and historical factors influence developmental transitions.
4. Explain communication processes important to transitions between developmental stages.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP?

As parents of three teenagers, Ashley and Tom Rybecki never imagined spending time in the Dean of Students’ office at Emerson High School. Last year, Grace graduated with high honors, having spent her four years intensely involved with the debate team and the student council. She represented the school at a national debate tournament for three years and won the Best Speaker award as a senior. Currently, she is studying in Spain before starting college. Dan, a senior, has played on the varsity basketball team since the middle of freshman year and is president of the high school’s community outreach program. He was accepted into his top pick for college and is planning to move on campus in the fall after his high school graduation. Their youngest daughter, Holly, is a first-year student in danger of failing four classes due to attendance problems, poor exam scores, and missing homework. Although Holly was supposed to be involved in chorus and her church group, she seldom attends, saying that she doesn’t care about school and doesn’t plan to go to college. When Holly is at home, it hardly seems like she is there. She is in her room, scrolling through apps on her phone or texting her friends. Today’s discussion with the parents and the

vice principal focused on how to reengage Holly in school and prevent her from failing her first year.

As part of the discussion, Holly tries to get her parents to understand that she doesn't want the life that they want for her, that she doesn't want to live her life like her siblings. Her parents are concerned that she is making mistakes now that she will regret later. They don't know if Holly is going through a rough phase or if she really knows what she wants for her life. They keep asking her, "What can we do to help?" Holly refuses to talk about any of this, telling her parents that she is not one of their "star" children and that they expect too much from her.

THE END IS NEAR

At age 71, after 48 years of marriage, Bobby Ashford was diagnosed with stage 4 prostate cancer. Although he worked six days a week and sometimes on Sunday, he and his wife Sandra managed to raise three sons, and at this point, they have eight grandchildren, some of whom worked at the garage part-time while they were in school. "Gramps" is very special to everyone in the family. Since learning of his diagnosis, the family has struggled with the emotions as they contemplate what lies ahead, as it is clear that time is running out.

With their doctor's guidance, Bobby and Sandra began using hospice home care, rather than having Bobby die in a hospital, because they thought this would be easier on the family. The hospice staff have visited regularly for the past three weeks, providing support for Bobby and his relatives. The grandchildren come by every day to play cards or listen to music with their grandfather. Sometimes, they go through some of the old family photographs from their childhood to remember the good times, especially their yearly vacation week at the beach. Sandra wanders in and out until the children and grandchildren leave. Then she sits in bed next to Bobby while knitting a blanket for their ninth grandchild, who will be born next month. It's clear that Bobby is struggling more each day and that the end is near.

Bobby tells her she will be all right because she is a strong woman with many people who love her.

A hallmark of family life is change. Members enter family systems multiple ways, such as through birth or adoption, marriage or committed romantic partnerships, and/or voluntary role-based relationships. Members also exit family systems as a result of death, estrangement, or divorce. Along with changes in family membership, individuals in families change considerably over time as children mature into adulthood. As we discussed in Chapter 1, family systems theory explains that family members are interdependent on one another, meaning that changes for one individual affects other members of the family, as well as the family as a whole.

A major way that change happens in families connects to **developmental stages**, which are critical periods of change (also called life stages) from birth until death.[1] The major changes individuals tend to experience in their life can be grouped into specific periods ranging from prenatal to late adulthood. Each life stage has unique physical, emotional, mental, and social abilities and expectations. Importantly, families often have individuals from multiple life stages, such as Bobby's family in which intergenerational relationships span from grandchildren to adult children to late adulthood. Although it is sad, Bobby's family will welcome and say goodbye to two family members as the ninth grandchild is expected to be born during Bobby's final days.

Researchers originally focused on the changes that children would experience as they grew from infancy to the age of adulthood, typically at 18 years old. Developmental stages occur in relatively predictable ways, with children transitioning from highly dependent babies to entering the educational system to launching into adulthood. However, researchers have expanded their attention beyond childhood changes to better understand how individuals mature, change, and grow throughout life. Changes are less predictable in adulthood as individuals make choices about whether or not to marry, have children, and establish their own home. Individuals make

these kinds of choices based on cultural, financial, and geographic reasons. Individuals' unique transitions have contributed to the diverse family structures that make up the modern-day experience. For example, an individual may have a child when they are 19 or 49. The age of the parent will affect the experience of both the parent and the child within the child's developmental stage. For this reason, it's important to question our ideas about what families "should" be and what individuals "should" do within life stages. In this chapter, we will explore developmental stages alongside the **life-course perspective**, which considers how families might experience stages differently based on their unique structure, culture, or social identities. Thinking about the interplay between developmental stages and the life-course perspective gives us a broader understanding of the predictable and fluid ways that families relate to one another over the years.

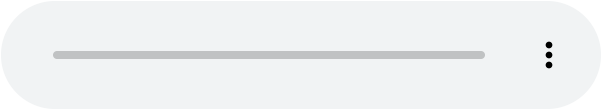
Importantly, communication is at the center of family development and change. First, any time that a family system or a specific family member experiences a transition, whether expected or not, communication plays a critical role in negotiating the process.[2] Second, family communication itself can help bring about change at different developmental stages. For instance, when a parent hears an adolescent interact in a more adult-like way or an aging parent's responses are jumbled and confused, this may help to move the family to the next stage of life. Every family experiences change at different points across the years, and how they interact and handle them depends on expectations of a particular life stage, past experiences, and the family's culture.

In this chapter, we highlight developmental and life-course perspectives on family systems and family communication, focusing on changes that occur throughout our lives as we interact and co-create relational meanings. First, we will understand key phases of child development, focusing on family communication patterns within developmental stages during the child-rearing phase of life (prenatal through emerging adulthood). Second, we will explore how a life-course perspective overlaps with and influences what is experienced within developmental stages. Third, we will talk about

transitions between life stages. Throughout the chapter, we focus on how communication plays a central role in family members' experiences, understanding, and adaptation across the lifespan.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE MODEL OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Think about writing a book about your life – how would you divide your life and the life of your family into chapters? What chapters do you anticipate you will write in the future? These chapters would undoubtedly represent different developmental stages in your life and in your family. Different family members might think about the stages in similar or different ways. For example, in the first case at the start of this chapter, Tom and Ashley might look back at that chapter as "the crazy teenage years" or "Holly's tough time." Each of these chapter titles would reflect how they are seeing a particular developmental stage. Researchers have grouped these common "chapters" into six specific life stages: (1) Prenatal, (2) Infancy and Toddlerhood, (3) Early Childhood, (4) Middle and Late Childhood, (5) Adolescence, and (6) Emerging Adulthood.[3] In this section, we will cover each stage, with a focus on unique family communication processes within each stage. As we will see, communication is central to how families approach and negotiate different circumstances.



▶ Scripts

Prenatal (Pregnancy Through Birth)

Have you ever thought about communicating with a baby before they are born? Maybe you recall images of headphones positioned on a pregnant belly playing Baby Mozart for the unborn baby. Although playing classical music for a fetus will probably not make the baby smarter or more musical,

the developing child does experience the music in ways that can affect their preferences and relationships after birth. Hearing is possible around week 25 of pregnancy when the structural components of the ear have formed. Studies show that infants have preferences for sounds heard while in the womb. One researcher tested babies' reactions to a popular television theme song, finding that the babies who heard the song regularly while they were in the womb responded to the song with changes in heartrate, movements, and responsive behaviors in the days after birth.[4] Researchers have also discovered links between mothers' resting heartrate and a baby's musical preferences, concluding that "the maternal heartbeat is the fetus' first metronome" (p. 2).[5] Perhaps more important than musical preferences is the connection that the fetus has to the human voice. Studies show that babies recognize the voice of the person who carried them during pregnancy, showing signs of strongly preferring that voice over other female voices after they are born.[6]

A pregnant woman and her fetus are intimately connected, such that the fetus experiences most of what the woman does. A process called **attunement** refers to positive behaviors with the fetus during pregnancy such as warmth, interest, and connection. Attunement during pregnancy is important for forming secure attachment after birth[7] and contributes to infant mental health.[8] The prenatal stage is clearly an important period of development in which the fetus forms in relation to the environmental and relational information filtering through the womb.

Difficult experiences during pregnancy also have a clear impact on the child's ability to deal with stress and instability later in life. For example, babies born to Dutch mothers during the winter famine months in World War II went on to develop higher levels of heart disease, diabetes, and obesity in adulthood.[9] Pregnant mothers present at the 9/11 World Trade Center attack were more likely to have babies with a biological marker of susceptibly to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); this effect was bigger for those who were present at the 9/11 attack during the third trimester.[10] Everyday stressors also pose risk factors for development. Children born

from individuals experiencing high rates of relationship aggression show biological reactions to this interpersonal conflict, evidenced by high cortisol levels in their urine after they are born.[11] Practitioners emphasize the importance of safe, comforting, and calm relationships for pregnant individuals to protect child wellness, both during pregnancy and later in life.

Fetuses are actively interacting with their environment from the womb, suggesting that one's culture and relational life begins to form during the last months of pregnancy. Family communication during the prenatal stage is clearly important and has emotional, mental, and physical links to the child later in life.

Infancy and Toddlerhood (Birth Through 2 Years)

If you have ever lived with a newborn baby, you are well aware of how one extremely small person can change an entire household. Babies enter the world as natural communicators, even if their methods may seem limited or basic. Babies communicate not only by crying but also by using facial expressions, eye contact, and movement. Usually, babies will send more subtle cues before crying, such as looking away, arching their back, or covering their face to communicate their preferences and dislikes. Researchers measure how long babies look at an object or will observe changes in how fast the baby sucks on a bottle to understand their reactions; these nonverbal cues offer insight into infants' inner worlds. Understanding infants' communication patterns reveals that they are active co-communicators with their parents or caregivers. Perhaps you have seen a baby in a large gathering turn their head away from the adults who come close to their face to interact with them. This baby is communicating that they are not interested in an intense one-on-one interaction and would like some space. However, many family caregivers tend to not respond to these subtler cues, and the baby escalates their communication to crying to make their needs known more clearly.[12] Viewing babies as excellent

communicators within their developmental stage allows their caregivers to interact with them more effectively.

Parents and/or family caregivers serve as their children's first communication models, eliciting babies' responses over time. The moment of birth exposes the child to the world of interpersonal contacts, beginning a powerful parent–child bonding process through physical contact, facial/eye contact, and reciprocal vocal stimulation. Most new parents respond to crying babies intuitively by cradling, rocking, or soothing the child.[13] Parental/caregiver warmth, support, sensitive responses, and children's temperament and signaling interrelate to create caregiver–child connections.[14]

Touch is an essential source of comfort, security, and warmth for babies and the family members who care for them. The first few months mark a critical period in the child's interpersonal learning, as a child's personality, temperament, and neurological wiring is already well in place during the earliest interchanges with nurturing caregivers. Children begin to respond to words at age 6 or 7 months; by 9 or 10 months, they can understand a few words and will begin to use language soon thereafter. As a result, caregivers set the stage for positive interpersonal development by verbally and nonverbally communicating to their child the feeling of being recognized and loved, a process that began in utero through fetal attunement.

Although the birth of a child tends to bring forth an emotional high, there are normal stresses that require unique communication in order to successfully navigate these new roles and feelings.[15] New parents must deal with communication-related tasks including renegotiating roles, navigating cultural expectations of what parents and caregivers should and should not do, and facilitating the healthy physical and social development of the child. As an important link to posterity, children often represent a continuation of the family name and heritage – a potentially heavy burden. Naming the child often becomes a communication event for the family system, as names may serve to connect family generations or reflect parental dreams. If you have children or want to be a parent one day, what aspects of your family background do you wish to pass on to them? Do you wish they could

experience the same type of Passover Seders or Christmas dinners you did as a child? Will you want them to have a strong Pakistani or Chinese identity? What games, songs, or stories will you teach them?

As children grow from infancy to toddlerhood, they begin to develop more sophisticated persuasive strategies, and power struggles are not uncommon. Toddlers begin to communicate their desires around issues such as bedtimes or favorite foods; in many cases, children can use multiple strategies to reach their goals.[16] Around 18 months, most children use negation quite effectively, starting with "NO!" During the infancy and toddler phase, caregivers have learned to cope with a growing child, and barring physical or psychological complications, the former newborn now walks, talks, feeds, and entertains themself for longer periods of time.

Early Childhood (2 to 6 Years Old)

Families with preschool-aged children tend to experience less pressure than those with newborn babies as children become a little less dependent on adult caregiving. Children exhibit well-developed language skills usually when they are between three and four years old. A typically developing 4-year-old may produce well over 2,000 different words, understand many more, and can identify tasks and expectations according to socialized conventional gender roles. As children become more independent, family caregivers may directly influence their language acquisition skills through enrichment activities such as reading, role-playing, and storytelling. Media increasingly impact children at this age. Small children watch television, play with computerized toys, and spend time on mobile phones or laptops when at home or at daycare. Children these days are born into a media-rich society and are thus **digital natives**, a term referring to children who are born into a culture surrounded with devices and Internet connectivity present in many aspects of daily life. Unparalleled to any previous generation, children may be able to communicate with a parent or extended family members at a distance by using video calls and other mobile

technologies. Of course, family economic resources directly affect access to these opportunities.

In the 3- to 6-year-old stage, children begin to communicate on their own with the outside world. Some attend preschool. At 5 or 6 years old, most enter kindergarten outside the home. Children learn about friendship with their fellow young peers and establish relationships outside the family. Children's interactions with one another vary in response to each other's socialized gender roles and social characteristics, such as dominance or shyness. By age 2, most children distinguish boys from girls, and within two more years, they identify behaviors and tasks according to conventional gender stereotypes.[17]

These early years set the foundation for a child's interaction and ties with their family systems, including the adults who care for them, any siblings, and relevant extended family members. For example, children may begin to interact regularly with cousins, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and members of chosen families, establishing connections that deepen as the years pass or that may be reinvented when the child is closer to young adulthood.[18]

Middle and Late Childhood (Age 6 Until Puberty)

Middle and late childhood marks a significant transition in children's development. During this time period, children develop many of their formative communication skills. Negotiation becomes an important aspect of children's communication. In this stage, children might push back on their parents and caregivers when there are disagreements about issues between them, such as amount of screen time allowed, extracurricular activities, and completing chores. Children's use of persuasive message strategies increases as they age. For instance, one research team reported that children ages 5 to 8 use one to two different arguments to create persuasive messages; children ages 9 to 12 use two to four arguments; and children ages 13 and older use three or more arguments.[19] Summarizing studies of children's speech, they discovered that 5- to 6-year-olds use more

pleading, sulking, threats, and requests. As they grow in communication complexity, children increasingly use more compromises, arguments that advance their views, more appeals to what they think society expects, and more deliberation about competing alternatives. Second and third graders may begin to use different negotiation and coercion strategies in an attempt to get what they want. Fourth and fifth graders develop more advanced abilities to engage in argument and persuasive strategies and teamwork to both coordinate with and persuade others, including their adult caregivers. As children age, they become increasingly competent at producing messages adapted to their listeners and creating counterarguments. During this period, a child's communication competence becomes increasingly influential in guiding decision-making with their families.

School-aged children, or "schoolagers" as one of the textbook author's (Warner) children refer to them, experience new communication opportunities and struggles as they become even more connected to the outside world. The family system overlaps continuously with other social systems, including educational, religious, and community-based groups. Schools introduce children to a wider world of ideas, beliefs, and values, while potentially challenging the values and practices of their parents and/or caregivers. Some parents find communicating with school personnel in support of a child's learning to be highly stressful. For example, the amount and type of homework can create nightly stress, especially for working parents.[20]

Parents from diverse cultural backgrounds may face special challenges – for example, school personnel vary in their perceptions about Hispanic and African American parents' involvement with their children's education.[21] An educator's lack of cultural sensitivity may result in family alienation or lack of direct involvement in a child's education. Some schools and communities will welcome the diverse family forms represented by their local students. When that is not the case, however, children will be faced with messages that discount or challenge their family experiences. Given that one in four children in the United States is an immigrant or child of an immigrant, special demands are placed on both adult caregivers and their

children to mediate the family–school relationship. Parents must strive to overcome the language barrier to be able to feel involved in their education and to intervene on behalf of their child when needed.[22] In families where parents do not speak or have limited English, school-aged children become "family translators" or "cultural brokers," a role that creates a significant power shift between parents and their children.

PHOTO 4.1 Parents play a major role in developing a child's communication competence.

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Some children in this phase remain close to home, participating in homeschooling rather than entering public or private elementary schools. Other school-aged children spend many hours away from the influence of their parents. In addition to school-related activities and sports, organizations such as Cub and/or Girl Scouts and religious organizations provide educational and recreational events. Although these opportunities can enhance children's lives and development, they also compete for family

members' time and financial resources. Some organizations may encourage or mandate family involvement, whereas others may attempt to set clear boundaries. In addition, some parents find it difficult to separate children's success in these activities from their own identity. For example, in one study of parent communication and child athletic involvement, researchers described how some parents tried to "butter up" the coaches to get special treatment for their child, and how coaches tried to set boundaries on the coach–parent relationship.[23]

During the school years, family identity and communication can be very satisfying as children engage in a range of joint activities, bringing richness to the intimacy of their family relationships. At the same time, most children begin to experience strong peer pressure, which may conflict with parental views. Often, family conflict develops because the child feels compelled to please friends rather than members of the family. Parental communication is especially important as children start to experience peer pressure. For example, mothers who take time to communicate with their children and listen empathically to them when disciplining or comforting them tend to have children who are less rejected by their peers and more frequently chosen as companions.[24]

Children living in two households due to parental separation or divorce experience unique challenges as they navigate custody arrangements and careful planning to ensure that all school materials are in the right household. For example, one team of communication scholars examined how parents co-raising children in different households interact and negotiate the details of the divorce decree. They found that some couples operate strictly by the letter of the law, some take a more flexible approach, and some use the details of the divorce decree to punish each other.[25] In one family, the co-parents of young children continually argued over who would have the children at certain times on holidays. They went to court, and the judge declared that one parent would have the children until 11:59 p.m. on Christmas Eve and would then need to deliver the children to the other house. After a holiday of exhausted and crying children, the parents made

the effort to interact and negotiate a more workable solution (which is likely what the judge hoped would happen).

Adolescence (Puberty Until Age 18)

Adolescence is a pivotal time of identity development. The bulk of individual identity development occurs after puberty as teens explore how they define themselves in areas such as sexuality, identity, autonomy, and friendships. Teens go through a process of **individuation**, meaning that they separate from early family and childhood identities to develop and express a unique personal identity. Although researchers have often characterized adolescence as a tumultuous period, current research takes a more nuanced approach, framing adolescence and communication in this developmental stage within the cultural and socioeconomic factors that influence family systems at this time.[26]

Perhaps the most dramatic change throughout the developmental cycle occurs in this developmental stage as a result of puberty. Biological maturation differs from person to person; some children begin puberty when expected, whereas others develop much earlier or later than their peers. Hormonal changes impact the adolescent's moods, aggression, and feelings of self-worth, all of which affect interaction processes with the family system. It is not uncommon for adolescents to experience struggles as they cope with change and individuation.

Researchers have stressed the importance of family communication during the transition to adolescence, and later to emerging adulthood, to the development of adult identity and managing the tensions of attachment and separateness.[27] Teens and their families must balance new levels of autonomy and connection, a process explained by relational dialectics theory discussed in Chapter 3. For most adolescents, prior interest in friendships switches to a growing romantic interest in others. Teens often retreat behind the closed doors of their bedrooms, and digital interactions with peers become more and more private to assert increased independence. In fact, teenagers increasingly establish strong boundaries with their parents

around certain topics.[28] Communication privacy management theory, which we discussed in Chapter 3, helps us understand how adolescents enact their perceived right to manage their private information. Stronger physical and psychological boundaries, which limit communication with some or all family members, are established.

As an important part of the individuation process, personal decision-making also provides a sense of autonomy for teenagers. Most will remember a desire for greater self-reliance and a desire to make up their own minds during their teen years. By asserting their developing talents to speak out, work, or perform tasks without constant help and supervision, adolescents signal their maturity and competence. This can be a difficult time for adult caregivers who may naturally want to increase communication and control at a time that children are pulling away. To the extent that parents and caregivers are able to encourage and model a climate of trust and emotional support, adolescents will be more willing to let parents know more about their activities.[29] Success builds on success in this way.

The sexual development of their children has a powerful effect on many relationships in the family of origin. The natural upsurge in sexual thoughts and feelings in this developmental stage serves as an undercurrent to many interactions in ways that can make adult caregivers uneasy because they are forced to consider the child as a sexual being. Unfortunately, in many families, this results in discomfort with nonverbal affection and constrained communication about sex. Amanda Holman interviewed teens about their communication with their parents about sex, finding that most teenagers desire more communication than they received. She found that teens wanted parents to offer more specific and comprehensive information about sex, particularly regarding issues of safety.[30] When it comes to parent–child communication about sex, parental discomfort might actually be more of a barrier to discussion than teenagers' willingness to talk.

Adolescents may be drawn into family conflicts that can lead adolescents to blame themselves for the conflict or to feel responsible for solving their

families' problems.[31] Teenagers of divorced parents often find themselves caught in the middle between their parents, and they want to see their parents work out their own difficulties while keeping them and their best interests in the center of their attention.[32] In a series of focus-group interviews with young adult stepchildren, one author of your textbook (Braithwaite) and her colleagues found that adolescent children want to know what is going on in the family system, at a level that is appropriate for their age, and very much want to avoid the negative feelings of being caught between their parents.[33]

PHOTO 4.2 Like individuals, whole family systems also pass through various "seasons" of their lives.

Monkey Business Images/Shutterstock

Although adolescence can be a challenging time for family communication, it is clear that positive family communication is important for adolescent adjustment and positive communication with their peers. Those families who develop positive communication during childhood are

more likely to be able to adjust their interactions and relationships during adolescence. Rather than needing to create new ways to interact, these family systems find they are revising communication patterns in adolescence.[34]

Emerging Adulthood (18 to 29 Years Old)

Although child development technically ends when the child reaches the age of adulthood at 18 years, emerging adulthood is a liminal period in which children stay somewhat dependent on their family of origin to varying degrees. The phase typically spans from the age of adulthood (18 years) and throughout individuals' 20s.[35] The "launching" into adulthood is a transition for individuals and their families.[36] During this period, children move from being dependent on their family systems to a sense of individual responsibility for life choices and responsibilities. When young adults live on their own, especially if they are self-supporting, they assume the responsibilities of adulthood, including significant decision-making and financial responsibility. For some young adults, this process actively begins with a move to the college campus; for others, it may occur later if they remain living at home as they enter the workplace or attend a local college. Specific conversational topics involve managing money, negotiating living space, making career decisions, maintaining good health habits, or staying in contact with the family of origin. When this separation takes place without significant struggle, parent–child communication usually becomes more open and flexible. Frequent contact with parents, siblings, and other family members via cell phones, texts, e-mails, or visits maintains family ties, and technological developments have increased the amount of interaction many parents and young adults experience at this life stage.

By this point in time, adult children have negotiated (and likely continue negotiating) with caregivers issues such as privacy rights and the management of intergenerational boundaries.[37] Although many parents and adult children experience an improvement in their communication and relationship as the children become independent, that is not the case in all

families. For example, adult children and parents may continue to engage in conflict, as some adult children have reported that most conflicts result from the parents' unwillingness to provide assistance and accept the child's autonomy.[38]

The high cost of living, underemployment, or unemployment make leaving home difficult. As we noted in Chapter 1, many college students and young adults are living at home or returning home to live after college due to economic pressures, a process referred to as "renesting."[39] Many married children who are divorcing return home as single parents for the same reason. More midlife adults are intimately involved with their children's lives than in the previous generation. Parental support of grown children appears ongoing in many cases; this includes listening and emotional support, advice, childcare, and financial assistance.[40]

BOX 4.2 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. Think back to your memories of the developmental stages you have experienced up until now. Do you remember a specific developmental stage more than others? Was there a stage that you enjoyed more or less than others?
2. Did your family find specific developmental stages easier or more challenging than others? What were some of the things that made some developmental stages more enjoyable for your relationship with your family? What were some of the things that made some of the stages harder for you and your family?
3. Recall one or two important milestones in which you or someone in your family entered into a new phase of life. Which developmental stage would you put those milestones in? What

communication processes changed in response to these milestones?

LIFE-COURSE PERSPECTIVE

Although there are somewhat consistent tasks and events within the development stages of childhood, developmental stages in adulthood are not as clearly defined. Individuals progress through early to middle to late adulthood in unique ways. Adults respond to new experiences surrounding marriage, child-rearing, and careers in ways that drastically shape their lives and families. We know that families consist of multiple individuals in different life stages at the same time, which affects how other members experience life within their specific development stages. For instance, in one family, a 45-year-old divorced man with children who are 10, 15, and 20 years old marries a 24-year-old woman who has never lived away from home. The teenagers and emerging adult in this family will experience changes in how they negotiate family identity and closeness to the family system as they relate to their new stepmother, their newly wed father, and the system-level changes that result from the new family structure. Every child experiences the tasks and freedoms of new developmental stages within the context of their unique family structures, a point we illustrated in the previous section by highlighting relevant family communication practices within specific stages of childhood. Caution is important in taking a strictly developmental approach to family relationships. Because of this, it's important to complement the model of child development with a **life-course approach**, which focuses on how different trajectories and transitions are influenced by the ways that families develop and change at various times.

A life-course approach addresses two key shortcomings of the developmental model. First, a life-course approach recognizes that there is

diversity in family structures. Early writings about the family life cycle assumed that children were raised in two-parent family systems. Developmental stage models tend to reflect the lives of middle-class, intact, white families.[41] However, the family system takes a wide variety of forms and functions as families continue to change over time, as we discussed in Chapter 1. Developmental stage frameworks provide broad categories that capture the experience of many families with children, but they cannot always account for the experience of individual families with different family structures, such as single-parent families or those with children widely spaced by age. The challenge with developmental models is that they are necessarily simplified to represent the experiences of many families to the point they are not very good at helping us understand the experiences of particular families and their members.[42] Other families – such as couples who are childless by choice, children being raised by their grandparents, or lesbian and gay families – are often overlooked. As we have emphasized throughout this book, however, families who follow "nontraditional" patterns, such as stepfamilies, single-parent families, or those with different cultural backgrounds, are not abnormal.[43] In fact, in Chapter 1 and throughout this book, we have stressed that the stereotypical "nontraditional" family is actually often the norm.

Second, a life-course approach provides a valuable way to understand how change in families is linked to the life trajectories of individuals in ways that influence how we interact at different times.[44] Did you grow up singing the old playground rhyme "first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby with the baby carriage"? This old adage suggests that there is a certain order to how families should come together. But what does it mean to say that a family is developing "normally" or experiencing events at the "right time"? Today, family theorists consider variation in family experiences, such as divorce and single parenting, as part of a wider view of stages.[45] A life-course approach views family life as a path with forks in the road along the way, rather than as a "straight-line" model of family development. The life-course approach helps us understand the

experience of “nontraditional” families as more normal than not. To use the language of a systems perspective from Chapter 1, equifinality is in play, and there is no one accepted or normal family experience. As we stressed in Chapter 2, families work out the ways that they want to relate and interact with one another through their communication.

A life-course perspective focuses on three types of time: individual time, generational time, and historical time. *Individual time* refers to chronological age. *Generational time* refers to “family time” or the positions and roles individuals hold in families (e.g., grandmother, breadwinner). *Historical time* refers to how events that occur during the era in which one lives shape family relationships (e.g., the civil rights movement, the creation of the Internet, COVID-19). We will consider how each of these perspectives about time shape experiences within child developmental stages.

Individual Time

From a life-course perspective, *individual time* refers to how chronological age interacts with important life markers that tend to be thought of as “on-time” or “off-time.” **“On-time” events** fit the patterns we expect in a given culture, whereas **“off-time” events** differ from society’s expectations. For example, whereas most individuals have historically married in their twenties (traditionally viewed as “on-time”), today individuals are increasingly marrying for the first time in their 40s or choose to cohabit in a committed relationship for decades. Increasing numbers of women are becoming mothers well into their late 40s or early 50s. Many individuals will experience three or four careers before leaving the workforce, return to college multiple times to earn multiple degrees, or work until they are in their 80s. Such variations are considered “off-time” compared to historical norms, but they are certainly not unique today. Although the terms “off” versus “on” suggest that there is a way these life events “should” be happening, in reality, the ways that families form and function are in flux. Within the life-course approach, it is useful to consider how the timing of

the developmental stages interact with individual time to better understand the complexities embedded in communication within family systems over time. Major sites where individual time influence the family system include (a) marriage and (b) the transition to parenting.

First, expectations about whether and when to marry are increasingly diverse. The majority of U.S. Americans continue to opt into marriage; however, Pew Research data reveals that decisions on when or even if to marry continue to change.[46] More and more individuals are choosing not to marry at all. In 2021, 25% of people in their 40s had never been married, an increase from the 1980s in which just 6% of this age group had never married. About one third of adults reported being single in 2020. For those who do marry, the age at first marriage continues to increase. The average age for men went from 25 years old in 1980 to 30 years old in 2021; women's age went from 22 years old to 28 years old in this same time period. Individuals are waiting to marry for a variety of reasons, including not being financially ready, being more particular about finding a partner who is a good match, and feeling too young and unprepared to partner.

Thinking about how marriage statistics evolve over time encourages us to think about how the timing of marriage and/or singlehood shapes individual- and family-level experiences. This approach helps us get out of an assumption that marriage should happen, and should happen at a certain phase of life, to better understand the factors at play in family relationships. Marriage statistics are related to the timing of parenting decisions as well as educational and career goals, as individuals who get married later in life tend to have children later and tend to be more established in their careers. On the other hand, those who marry earlier in adulthood navigate stressors such as higher education, choosing and establishing oneself within a career, identity changes that occur in early adulthood, and potentially child-rearing within the context of a significant legal partnership.

Rather than assuming that individuals should get married within a specific time of life, the life-course approach gives room to consider how individuals might want to shape their lives and relationships. Individuals who have not married in early adulthood have historically been stigmatized.

However, removing the expectation of marriage from specific age groups provides additional options for family structures. Gendered stereotypes of the “lifelong bachelor” and the “spinster” hold less weight now than they used to, and this flexibility allows for new possibilities for singlehood and/or intentional romantic relationships. For example, more individuals are opting into singlehood, which has important implications for how they think about and relate to their family system. About half of the 30% of U.S. adults who are single say that they are not interested in pursuing a romantic relationship. Intentionally single individuals have more flexibility with their time and money, more control over their individual lives, and more opportunities to be interdependent with other family members and friends than their married peers. Similarly, there is a recent rise in individuals opting into co-living arrangements with nonfamily members instead of living in a private nuclear family structure. Co-living allows individuals to benefit from shared resources that are common in nuclear families (e.g., utilities, rent/mortgage costs, chores, and maintenance) without having the financial and relational commitments of marriage or other more conventional family structures.

Cohabitation is becoming more common and adaptive to specific family configurations. About 59% of U.S. adults have cohabitated with a romantic partner at some point in their life, making cohabitation a more common experience than marriage. Individuals are cohabitating more often in every stage of adulthood. Although 35% of adults have both cohabitated and been married, an increasing number of individuals are opting for cohabitation as a long-term plan instead of marriage. About half of cohabitating adults share their living situation with a romantic partner and children, further separating marriage from family life. Disentangling marriage from family definitions not only reflects modern experiences but also allows individuals to create family structures that reflect personal values and preferences.

Divorce rates have dropped in recent years, but divorce continues to be a relatively common experience for many. After divorce, remarriage continues to be common, although it is more common for older individuals than it is for young adults. Later in life marriage (first marriage as well as

remarriage) is becoming more mainstream. For example, *The Bachelor* dating reality show franchise has predominantly showcased "on-time" romantic commitments as the social norm. However, the 2023 addition of *The Golden Bachelor* featured a 72-year old man dating other women in his age group, resulting in a proposal and nationally televised wedding to a 70-year old woman. The media coverage of their dating relationship and wedding acknowledges that marriage is becoming increasingly removed from happening only within a specific developmental period.

Thinking about post-divorce families helps us consider that, even during expected life stages and transitions, interruptions to the stages occur. Although it's hard to imagine someone going into a marriage anticipating divorce and becoming part of a stepfamily later in life, we need to realize that "interruptions" like these become part of each family's life-course, bringing both challenges and opportunities. We have emphasized the idea that models of family development are generalizable across broad family stages; at the same time, we need models that take into account different family systems that can spring up over the life-course. These models are designed to describe family development in particular types of family, such as in the stepfamily. To illustrate this idea further, let's take a look at the "Family Matters" box about how individuals adapt and change in response to becoming a stepfamily.

BOX 4.3 FAMILY MATTERS: SURVIVING AND THRIVING IN A STEPFAMILY

Patricia Papernow summarized over 20 years of research and clinical work with stepfamilies in her Stepfamily Cycle Model, presenting the developmental markers that represent how stepfamilies change and grow over time. First, she characterizes the *Early Stages* as a time when stepfamilies are "getting started or getting stuck," often finding that as they immerse themselves in the stepfamily, things easily go

wrong and different family members try to figure out who is to blame. Hopefully by the end of the Early Stages, members of the stepfamily understand that no one is to blame and that this confusion and concern is normal in the development of many stepfamilies, giving way to greater clarity and compassion. Second, in the *Middle Stages*, the family often sees more open communication as they air their differences, conflict becomes less common, and a more productive middle ground emerges among the different stepfamily members as they "figure out what matters to each member." In the best of situations, the stepfamily becomes more flexible and willing to learn from one another. Third, the *Later Stages* represent mature stepfamilies, where in the best of circumstances, the stepchild–stepparent relationships have stabilized, with stepparents often able to function as mentors for stepchildren. In the later stages, the stepfamily feels like a family, accepting the limitations and differences that they cannot resolve while imbibing their communication with their shared history, experiences, and wellbeing. Papernow encourages us to think about these stages as "stations" because stepfamilies do not always follow them in tidy, neat, linear stages. Rather, they typically move back and forth between these stages. In the end, her work demonstrates that the various ways in which stepfamilies develop and adapt to meet the individual and collective needs of its members matter.

For further reading, see Papernow, P. L. (2013). *Surviving and thriving in stepfamily relationships: What works and what doesn't*. Routledge.

A second important way that individual time influences the family system involves the transition to parenting. Historically, it was largely assumed that individuals would become parents after getting married during adulthood. But much like ideas about marriage are changing, the entrance into parenthood is increasingly diverse. More individuals than ever do not plan to become parents. Recent Pew data shows that 44% of non-parents

under 50 years of age say they are unlikely to have children, up from 37% in 2018. Gen Z and Millennials cite financial (e.g., high student debt, lower salaries, inaccessible housing market) and moral reasons (e.g., climate change) for not wanting children. Individuals who are childfree by choice have faced judgment from others who believe that not having children is selfish or leads to an unfulfilling life.[47] However, childfree family structures will become more common as fewer adults opt into parenthood, and the stigma around this life choice will probably lessen as this family form becomes more common.

Some people who previously expressed that they did not intend to become parents do, indeed, become parents. They may change their minds or may become pregnant when they did not intend to. Communication scholar Julia Moore studied the experiences of women who became mothers after telling others they did not want children and describes some of the face-threatening messages they receive in return that negate their earlier choices, such as “We always knew you’d change your mind” or “Your life would never have been complete without children.”[48]

For those who do enter into parenthood, it now occurs later in life than it did in earlier decades. Age of U.S. mothers at the birth of their first child has increased steadily over the last decade; the average age of first-time mothers in 2021 was 27.3 years old.[49] Rather than assuming that individuals will have children and have them in a specific phase of life, a life-course approach considers how parental age interacts with other features of the family system. For example, some adolescents may shorten the adolescent development stage if they get pregnant and decide to parent. Parental responsibilities may feel more stressful to younger individuals and require resources that exceed young parents’ financial and emotional resources. Parenting “off-time” as a teenager can put a strain on educational goals, at times requiring individuals to drop out of school and take on adult responsibilities before they are ready or relying on their family system to support them and their child(ren) during the pre-adult phase of life. Young parents have to take on significant caregiving responsibilities or earn income to support their child. Grandparents may be more involved in the

housing, economic, and child-rearing aspects of children born to teen parents. These adolescents face different stresses than those who do not confront such complications and may have little preparation or support for these roles.

On the other end of the spectrum, increased parental age means that there are more older parents than there used to be. Reproductive technology advancements have allowed individuals to have healthy pregnancies later in life. The number of women giving birth after turning 40 has more than doubled since 1990. Men's fertility has a much longer range, as they can produce sperm until their last stages of life. Research on older parents suggests that there are pros and cons to this type of "off-time" parenting. Older parents face social stigma. Ageist attitudes can suggest that older parents do not have the energy and patience required to care for young children, that they are not able to relate to the cultural norms of modern parenting, that they will be too old to be involved when their child becomes an adult, or that there are too many biological risks associated with fertility in later adulthood. At the same time, older parents report having more life experiences, material resources, and maturity to meet the demands of young children than they would have had in earlier phases of life. Rather than making conclusions about how old or young it is to become a parent, a life-course approach considers how individual timing affects this family transition. How might older parents be able to care for their children in ways that younger parents cannot? How might a child's experiences differ within each developmental stage when they have parents who are older than their friends' parents? These types of questions entertain the life-course perspective in ways that prompt us to question assumptions about how the family "should be" and consider the lived experiences that shape families in our contemporary society.

Generational Time

In addition to thinking about family development in terms chronological age (e.g., being "too old" or "too young"), we can also consider family

experiences based on *generational time*, or the positions and roles that individuals hold in families. The way that family roles present within family systems has strong links to societal assumptions about family roles that are embedded in specific generational attitudes, norms, and expectations. Future generations of families will be represented by elongated generational structures due to the recent changes in population growth in industrialized nations – another life-course factor. Due to increased longevity and decreased fertility, the population age structure in these nations has changed from a pyramid, with few older family members to a larger younger generation, to a long but thin rectangle, with more family generations alive at the same time but with fewer members in each generation.[50] In some countries, such as China, the effect will be an inverted pyramid, given that four grandparents may have only one grandchild due to the one-child policy that began in the late 1970s,[51] but which was phased out in 2015. This creates shifts in relational interaction as elder generations compete for connections to limited numbers of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Multigenerational bonds grow in significance as the length of lifespans increases, and this longevity will result in an increase in shared years together. We may have relationships with grandparents, great-grandparents, and great-great-grandparents, whereas this would have been rare in previous generations. These elders can bring great strengths to families, as well as increased caregiving responsibilities.

Although no single model can reflect the complexities of all possible family system structures, the life-course approach enables us to consider important factors when understanding family development. It depicts differentiation as normal, rather than as a deviation. To follow, we talk about a generational time perspective on family development as seen through the lens of family roles, first discussing parents then grandparents. Throughout, we highlight social identities related to these roles as they emerge from generational time, including gender and sexual identity.

Parents overwhelmingly view their role as parent as an important part of their identity. At the same time, the transition to parenthood presents both opportunities and challenges for the relational growth and closeness new

parents experience. Even though family structures increasingly include single parents, cohabitating partners, and stepparents, the majority of children in the United States are being raised by two married biological or adoptive parents.[52] When parents raise a child with a partner, their communication shifts dramatically in response to the significant time and energy the parenting role requires.[53] No matter when a pregnancy occurs, significant changes in a couple's relationship follow. When a couple desires a child and the pregnancy is uncomplicated, this time may involve much intimate communication and long-range planning, yet subtle communication changes occur, particularly in conflict patterns. Three factors that influence couples during the transition to parenthood are (a) their views on parental responsibilities and restrictions, (b) the gratification that child rearing holds for them, and (c) their marital intimacy and stability. In one of his earlier studies of the transition to parenthood, communication scholar Glen Stamp found that couples who had quite a bit of autonomy before the arrival of children are especially challenged to negotiate the dialectic of autonomy and connection.[54] For instance, one spouse cannot easily call the other and announce they are working late. Stamp argued that new parents facing this transition "need to renegotiate the reality of their marriage, due to both the presence of the child and to their transformed presence with one another with the addition of a new role."[55] This highlights the important role of communication when negotiating expectations.

PHOTO 4.3 Elders can bring great strengths to families, as well as increased caregiving responsibilities.

Ground Picture/Shutterstock

Whereas women traditionally have assumed the major responsibility for baby care, fathers are increasingly sharing the efforts. Even so, mothers tend to provide more childcare than fathers. In one study of new parenting, for example, researchers reported that parenthood expands the workload at home because the arrival of a child increases the number of family-related activities carried out on any given day.[56] New fathers increase their participation in tasks from 1.9 to 2.4 tasks a day on average, whereas new mothers increase from 3.9 to 5.3 tasks a day. To date, much more is known about the role of mothering across childhood and adolescence; less is known about what characteristics of fathers matter most,[57] although the study of fathering is becoming a growing area of research. Whereas mothers tend to experience a dramatic transition after a child's birth, fathers may experience a more dramatic transition to parenthood after the first six months. Fathers expect changes in the early period, such as changes in a

partner's body or availability, but are faced with a different reality when things do not shift back as easily as they expected.[58] Fathers are more likely to confront pressures to remain consistent in their workplace commitments than mothers who may have maternity leave and, in many cases, reduced or altered work expectations. Same-sex partners need to negotiate role responsibilities because they are not presented with strong societal expectations or scripts for same-sex parenting. In cases of open adoption, the adoptive parents will begin to establish the patterns of contact with their child's birth mother and/or family.

Clearly, becoming a parent alters the identity of each of the parents, yet it also changes the couple's relationship as well. Researchers have found that it is not unusual for new parents to put their relationship on the "back burner" during the time they adjust to life with a newborn baby.[59] If you have been through this experience yourself or witnessed it among family and friends, it is likely you noticed adjustments to about every area of life, such as sleeping patterns, anxiety over caring for a child, and changes in couple intimacy. If both partners are working outside the home, challenges with being a dual-career couple will likely increase as they become parents. The story is not all negative, of course, as new parents tend to laugh together, hug and kiss, and discuss feelings about as often as do partners without children.[60] What is important to understand is that relational quality before the child arrives is still the best predictor of marital quality after becoming parents. Consequently, couples should not blame their relational problems on having children, nor should they think that having a child will repair or save a troubled relationship.[61]

Although the life-course differs across family types and different cultural experiences, complex family structures will be more reliant on communication to navigate the influence of generational time on their family's development over time. Single parents, LGBTQIA+ parents with children, and unmarried cohabiting couples will go through some variation of these same phases of developmental transitions. As we discussed in Chapter 2, the more that families form relational structures outside of the

cultural norm, the more discourse-dependent they are.[62] This is not unexpected or bad, but it does remind us that these families will be especially reliant on communication to negotiate relationships and expectations within the family and that they need to explain, and at times defend, their family to others. For example, for multiethnic couples or those from different religions, the child's cultural or religious affiliation may become a contentious issue and present an important communicative task and opportunity for the new parents. In addition, in multiethnic families, establishing their cultural identity is important within a culture that may not value their family form.[63] Single parents will likely need to rely on relatives or hired childcare resources in order to remain employed.

Increased acceptance and expression of sexual and gender minorities in our current social climate have important implications for family roles. LGBTQIA+ parents often identify significant role models for their children to support their children's identity development. For example, lesbian couples may seek out male role models, or gay couples may ask close female friends to play a meaningful role in their child's life.[64] Of course, parents may also "come out" to their children during childhood or adolescence. Parents will need to consider what to reveal to children and when, and expect changes to family identity as well as to the parent–child relationship.[65] For example, researchers interviewed young adults about the parental coming out experience and found that most of them were very supportive of their LGBTQIA+ parents, although they had to handle negative attitudes and communication from others about their parent's coming out, especially those in the family who disapproved of same-sex relationships.[66] Researchers have also found that adolescent adjustment and quality of peer and family relationships do not differ significantly from adolescents raised in opposite-sex parent homes. For such adolescents, the quality of parent–adolescent relationships and interaction, rather than family form, is associated with positive adjustment.[67]

A second major area that we see generational time shaping family roles is grandparenting. Active and extended grandparenting is becoming more

common given increased longevity and the rise in single-parent and same-sex parent households. Today, grandparents may range in age from 30 to 90-plus, with grandchildren ranging in age from newborns to even retirees themselves. A 30-year-old adult has a 75% chance of having at least one living grandparent.[68] Children in stepfamilies may have up to eight grandparent figures or even more, depending on how many relationships the parents have. An increasing number of grandparents take on participatory roles in modern families, particularly in situations of divorce and caregiving when their children have careers. Some grandparents and grandchildren experience limited face-to-face contact. However, many grandparents are now tech-savvy, and young adults tend to have more contact with grandparents than in previous generations, as many seniors' prime motivation for going online, getting smartphones, and learning to text is to connect with their children and grandchildren.[69] Video calls permit grandparents and grandchildren to interact in ways that were not possible in previous generations. Likewise, the use of social media, photo-sharing sites, and other social technologies increase communication between parents, grandparents with adult children, and grandchildren, at least for those with the financial means to possess and use these technologies.

Assuming the title and role of grandparent is certainly an identity shift for most people, yet it can open the door for positive family communication experiences. Grandparents may play many different roles depending on geographic location, amount of available time, connections to the parents, and the level of responsibility they have for their grandchildren. Their role contributions include spending pleasurable time with the child, providing financial support for grandchildren or their parents, extending emotional support during divorce or parental separation, or assisting with the caretaking of a child with special needs.[70] These interpersonal roles may vary across time, across family situations, and as a result of the health and willingness of the grandparent.

Grandparents and grandchildren who interact frequently express feelings of closeness; grandparents can help the family experience continuity, and grandchildren develop increased self-identity through storytelling and oral

history. Indeed, grandparents provide access to a grandchild's ancestry and the family's roots. Through conversation and storytelling, the intergenerational transmission of family lore and history is passed down. Family storytelling also helps families understand difficulties and uncertainties in later life, such as health challenges, increased caregiving needs, and dementia of a grandparent.[71] Grandparenthood provides an opportunity for meaningful interaction, even though it usually does not entail the responsibilities, obligations, or conflicts of parenthood. Stress can result, however, if grandparents are drawn into parental conflicts. Occasionally, grandparents act as an emotional refuge for children in a strife-torn family, serving as supporters and listeners.

Multiple factors affect how grandparents play their roles, such as age, gender, and culture. "Off-time" grandparents have varied experiences: Those who are young may resist the title and role, whereas very old grandparents may not be capable of active engagement in the role.[72] Maternal grandparents tend to have closer relationships and more communication with their grandchildren than paternal grandparents.[73] Although most communication researchers focus on what family stories grandparents pass down, some have examined how young adult grandchildren react when grandparents engage in painful disclosures with them, and found that the discomfort some grandchildren feel about these disclosures predicts less satisfying grandparent–grandchild relationships.[74]

Furthermore, cultural expectations affect grandparent involvement. In certain cultures, grandparents are expected to assume a major role in child rearing. For example, in many African American families, older family members play many roles – adviser, mediator, financial supporter, health resource, and transmitter of culture. A study of Black, Latina, and Caucasian grandmothers raising or helping to raise grandchildren revealed that Latina grandmothers had higher satisfaction than the other grandmothers when they co-parented with a parent in the household; Black grandparents, however, experienced higher life satisfaction when they had custodial, rather than co-parenting, situations.[75] Such cross-generational

contact provides opportunities for extended transmission of culture and for the development of a sense of family history.

The performance of the grandparent role reflects existing connections between the grandparent and parent generation. When adult children become parents, it can create an opportunity for reconnection and healing in some families, as the younger generation may have a new understanding and appreciation of what their parents did.[76] Relationships with grandparents can be very positive for young children and adolescents, given that the grandparents can listen and give advice without the control issues that parents and children face. Some parents at midlife appreciate this relationship and understand its benefits, whereas others may be threatened by the close relationship between grandparents and their children and perhaps even be envious at times.

Historical Time

Historical time refers to events that occur during the era in which one lives that influence how the family develops and communicates throughout developmental stages. From this perspective, we recognize that the development of individuals and families living in the new millennium reflects our particular historical period. For example, the influences of digital media, racial discrimination and violence, economic uncertainties, environmental concerns, globalization, new reproductive technologies, and terrorism all influence how a given family interacts with those inside and outside the family. Family scholars have developed different models, such as the one depicted in Figure 4.1, to explain the nested nature of families within society and the degree to which families are affected by major events outside of the family system.[77] This model recognizes that individuals are embedded in immediate and extended family systems, or "*micro level structures*," which are themselves embedded in "*macro level*" *structures* consisting of communities and the sociocultural forces at play in larger society.[78]

This model displays how historical time affects families on two dimensions. First, **horizontal stressors** are the issues that unfold over time, such as the developmental transitions we have covered so far in this chapter. Other horizontal stressors include unpredictable events, which we cover in depth in Chapter 11. Important for considering the effect of historical time on family development are events such as war, natural disasters, and the political climate. For example, the 2019 novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, significantly disrupted family development. The global pandemic led to widespread quarantine protocols, prompting schools across the globe to switch to remote learning. Students from pre-kindergarten through college experienced drastic changes in learning, with implications for their emotional, mental, and social development. Many missed developmental milestones, as proms were canceled and graduations were held online. Elementary students continued to learn but through online instruction without in-person access to their teachers and peers. Working parents juggled children in the home for months at a time alongside their professional responsibilities. Without the support of teachers and schools caring for dependent children, parents experienced burnout, resulting in mental health stress. Mothers carried more of the caregiving burden than fathers, and many women left the workforce when it became too difficult to meet the demands of their jobs alongside the educational, social, and physical needs of the children home in their care. The effect of the pandemic on children's development continues to come into focus as the generation of "COVID kids" progresses through subsequent developmental phases.

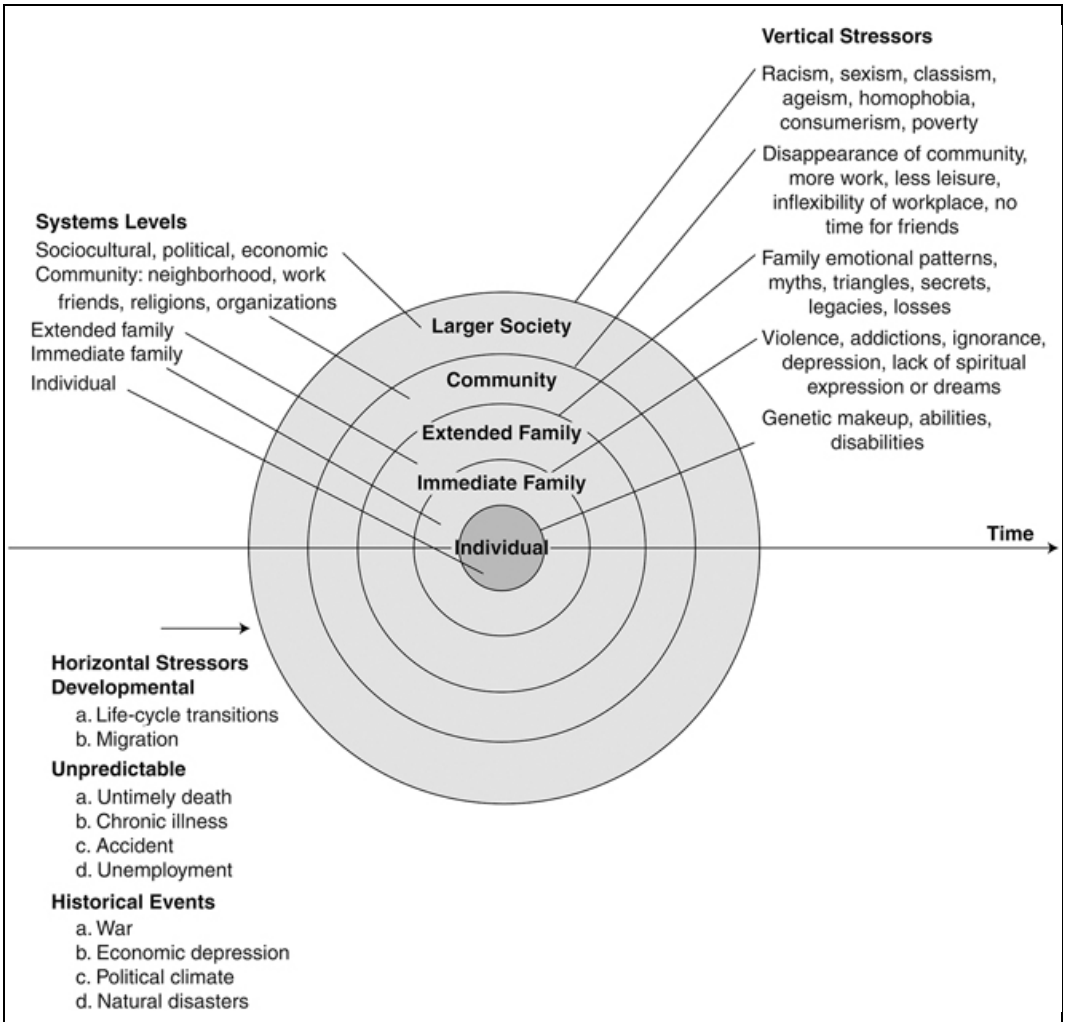


FIGURE 4.1 Flow of stress through the family.

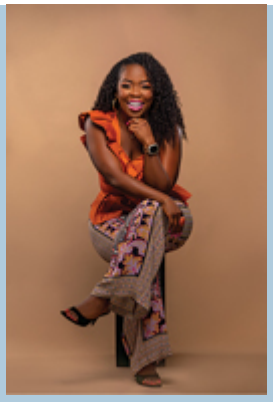
Note. Carter, Betty A., & McGoldrick, M., *The expanded family life cycle: Individual, family, and social perspectives* (3rd ed.), © 2005. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, New York.

In addition to horizontal stressors, families are affected by **vertical stressors**, which stem from issues embedded in the community and larger society (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, ageism, anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment; see Figure 4.1). The lens of **family privilege**, which refers to the benefits received by those who belong to family systems perceived by society as superior, highlights how non-white families face barriers based on historical legacies of racism and discrimination. Black families continue to experience societal stresses stemming from historical and current racism in

ways that shape their personal and relational lives. Slaves brought to America were separated from wealth when slave traders stole them from their homeland and sold them into slavery. Even after the abolition of slavery, Blacks were denied access to equitable employment, education, and homeownership. Even after the civil rights movement, Black families continued to face *redlining*, where public and private housing officials denied loans based on race or for homes within predominately Black neighborhoods, blocking Black families from buying homes and contributing to poverty within Black communities. Gentrification and "white flight" further segregated Black communities from wealth. These historical events are still at play today. Black families are less likely to experience intergenerational wealth because of structural racism. Statistics that reflect higher single parenthood, lower income, and increased incarceration among Blacks can be traced to the structures that oppressed Black families over time. The 2020 Black Lives Matter movement highlighted the violence still present for Blacks in the United States. Black families grieve children and family members lost to gun violence and police brutality. Individuals in Black families grapple with societal-level vertical stressors that have bearing on their personal development and family relationships. For example, let's take a moment to consider how one Black communication scholar's family experiences have shaped her current teaching and research interests in this "Family Portrait."

BOX 4.4 FAMILY PORTRAIT: DR. SHARDÉ M. DAVIS, UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

Dr. Davis' website: https://comm.uconn.edu/person/sharde-m-davis/



What drew you to study family communication?

As a college junior, I was accepted into the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program and conducted research with Dr. Tammy Afifi. This exposed me to the breadth of topics, and at that time I was intrigued by the Black family. I have always been fascinated by my family's interactions (or the lack thereof to put it more accurately) and was thrilled there were resources to study them.

What are your main areas of family scholarship?

As my research evolved to Black women's communication, I carried over earlier topics of communal coping and resilience. I studied how Black women perceive their friends as kinfolk and cultivate those relationships in comparable ways to blood-linked relatives.

How has your own family influenced what you teach and study?

My family consists of my mom and I. There were always relatives around, but I was not emotionally close to them. My mom worked two to three jobs and was rarely home, and so I relied on people in my neighborhood, church friends, and their respective families for everything. When discussing "family," I consistently talked about friends who played a significant role in my life. This experience set the

conditions for me to consider if other Black women in the U.S. have a similar perception of their sistah friends.

How can family communication students use your research in their own family life?

Families come in various forms; there is no "correct" or "ideal" family structure. Various U.S. cultural groups have so much generational trauma, abuse, and toxicity stemming from a legacy of systemic oppression. Members of these groups often operate from a place of survival and curate familial units involving people who they consider to be safe, stable, and loving rather than automatically choosing those who share a blood line or surname.

Past and present family stressors are affected by all levels of the larger systems in which the family operates. These are the life-course concerns – social, cultural, economic, and political contextual factors. One's community, family, and personal resources also contribute to the process of moving through life. Although this model is too complex for us to develop fully here, when you look at it, the model gives you a sense of the enormous number of life influences and variations experienced by your own family and other families. It also provides a lens for thinking about how changes over the various stages of your life are affected by historical and cultural events.

BOX 4.5 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. Thinking about your upbringing and your family structure, would you describe your experience as more aligned with an “on-time” or “off-time” structure? Were there specific issues related to your age or to other family members’ ages that made your experience in one or more developmental stages different from your peers?
2. Think about how the adults in your family cared for you when you were a child. Are there things about their parenting, grandparenting, and/or caregiving that seemed to be consistent with how things were done back then? Are there things you want to change if you plan to or are currently raising children?
3. What major historical events did you experience during your upbringing that changed you and your family? Are there different individual- and family-level changes that you can identify? How did your family adapt in response to events happening in the world that were felt in your home?

TRANSITIONS BETWEEN LIFE STAGES

Although each developmental stage offers life-changing experiences and opportunities for functional and meaningful communication, it is important to highlight the importance of transitions between these developmental stages. The instability between developmental periods often triggers highly meaningful, and sometimes challenging, family interactions. First, we need to emphasize that the borders between life stages are not always clear ones, as we or other members of our family may move back and forth between stages. For example, the stage of launching children may occur multiple times rather than once, or an aging parent we expected would need caregiving may remarry, move away, and become quite independent. These unexpected or unclear transitions will necessitate communication to best

navigate roles and what members of the family system want or need at a given time.

Second, stress occurs naturally during times of transitions between different stages of life, and especially when unexpected events occur.[79] Functional family systems manage these predictable changes through ongoing conversations about their expectations and experiences and by finding ways to recognize and support each other and navigate the contradictions of life at any given stage. Most families experience the transitions with temporary, but not permanent, stress. Functional families find ways to try to navigate or offset this stress by focusing on the positive aspects of any given stage and tackling the challenges. Transitions into committed partnerships or the birth of a child, for example, affect family functioning, but usually the family progresses through them as a normal maturation process. Transitions out of marriage – such as divorce, desertion, death, or serious illness of a member – can have negative effects and cause higher stress over longer periods of time. Functional families exhibit adaptive capacities that support them through very rough times.

Although we have taken a family systems view throughout this book, we certainly do not want to ignore that individuals within families experience transitions too, and these affect the larger family system in a variety of ways. For individuals and family systems, transitions provide periods of change and movements forward and backward, until the new normal becomes more routine.[80] Transitions necessitate and create opportunities for family communication as family members talk and co-create new meanings and patterns for themselves, as well as for others outside of the family. Family relationships are characterized by variability as each shift is negotiated. Only after a new pattern has begun to take hold can one let go of an old pattern.

Dysfunctional families most often fail to make transitions at the appropriate times in their lives or do not handle transitions effectively, creating imbalance in their family systems. These members, often confronting serious psychological or physical issues, may remain stuck at a certain developmental stage or are unable to move on, perhaps becoming

“off-course” in proceeding through expected changes in developmental stages. These affected families may experience a piling-up effect, with one or more members stuck at the same stage. Sometimes, these same family members experience external stresses, such as crime, bankruptcy, or a devastating divorce, and become even less able to cope. There are great variations in how families cope with developmental change. Some families experience a roller-coaster effect with little relief, especially when multiple stressors accumulate.

In the end, it will help for each of us to accept that change will be a constant in family life. If we wait for things to settle down or for the family to arrive at a stable plateau, we’ll likely be disappointed. Rather, we can appreciate each stage and the opportunities that arise as the family system recalibrates. The greater challenge and opportunity is to keep communication among members vibrant and meaningful across the lifespan.

BOX 4.6 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. In what ways did your family experience conflict or tension during transitions between developmental stages? What do you think contributed to your family experiencing the transitions as stressful?
2. How, if at all, did you or a member of your family experience any back and forth when going from one developmental stage to another? How did the family respond to this non-linear progression through developmental stages?
3. What are some ways of communicating that might have helped you and your family transition between developmental stages

more smoothly?

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we provided an overview of the effects of developmental stresses on communication within families and how these affect the life-course, discussing (a) developmental stages, (b) the life-course approach, and (c) transitions between life stages. We considered the developmental stages and marker events that are influenced by society and other historical macro forces, and we explored the micro forces within any particular family that affect the family system. Further, we looked at how families move through and interact at different stages in the life cycle and how they navigate the transitions between stages. Throughout the chapter, we considered how communication can help or hinder a family as they navigate the complex and challenging developmental tasks in each stage, as well as the importance of family communication on each individual family member's experience. In the end, family members communicate and manage both expected and unexpected changes as the family develops and evolves.

Key Words

Attunement
Developmental stages F
Digital natives
Family privilege
Horizontal stressors
Individuation
Life-course perspective
"On-time"/"off-time" events

FLASHCARDS

refers to positive behaviors with the fetus during pregnancy such as warmth, interest, and connection

occur in relatively predictable ways, with children transitioning from highly dependent babies to entering the educational system to launching into adulthood

a term referring to children who are born into a culture surrounded with devices and internet connectivity present in many aspects of daily life

which refers to the benefits received by those who belong to family systems perceived by society as superior, highlights how non-white families face barriers based on historical legacies of racism and discrimination

are the issues that unfold over time, such as the developmental transitions

meaning that they separate from early family and childhood identities to develop and express a unique personal identity

which considers how families might experience stages differently based on their unique structure, culture, or social identities

fit the patterns we expect in a given culture, whereas

differ from society's expectations

which stem from issues embedded in the community and larger society (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, ageism, anti-LGBTQI+ sentiment)

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SECTION 2

Communication and Family Cohesion

CHAPTER 5

Communication Patterns and the Creation of Family Identity

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BOX 5.1

How do family members communicate to create a unique family identity? How are meanings shared among family members? What types of family secrets, stories, and communication networks contribute to a family's identity? In this chapter, we explore how families use communication to form relational cultures and express their family identity. After reading this chapter, you will be able to

1. Describe how members of a family system strive to create mutual meanings through communication.
2. Compare and contrast constitutive rules with regulative rules for family interaction.

3. Explain how communication rules help families enact their primary and secondary family functions.
4. Understand how family secrets create and reinforce boundaries between the family and the outside world.
5. Identify and briefly describe four types of family communication networks.
6. Articulate what stories do for families and what questions they help answer for family members.

THE RENAISSANCE OF JOSH ZAUGG

Josh Zaugg was always a melancholic child. He cried frequently, never spoke up in large settings, and ultimately didn't have many friends. He didn't play any sports, had a laundry list of allergies, and would cry in pain without receiving so much as a bruise. He was easily dominated both physically and emotionally and never showed strength of any kind. Sure, at times he could be sweet and kind, but he never showed any sort of energy or vigor with his friends or family.

But that all changed one fateful day just before he started third grade. Josh was relatively insecure about his friends; they were an odd group and even bullied him from time to time. So he started hanging around his older brother, Cale, and Cale's friends when they would come over; he stuck to them like a shadow. Cale was never very happy about it, but once they took to Josh, there was nothing he could do. Josh was the cute, endearing little brother of their friend, and they found it entertaining to have him around.

Josh definitely looked up to Cale and his buddies. To him, their age made them cool, and gave him the social status he had yet to attain among his own peers. Plus, they didn't share Cale's mild disdain for him. Because of that, Josh tried hard to hide his weakness from Cale's friends. He was a totally different person around them – he pretended to be outgoing and

happy. He shed his introverted, melancholic skin and became an exuberant goofball. Because he had such limited exposure to them, he was able to pull it off pretty well.

The day before third grade started, Josh ran into Cale and one of his friends, Sean, at the back-to-school preview day. As Cale stood disapprovingly by, Josh was goofing around with Sean, jumping and running around on the playground. Suddenly, disaster struck; he tripped and skidded on his elbow, a typically devastating injury to his delicate body. Josh's family waited on bated breath for the inevitable fit of tears and screaming they had come to expect after this type of injury. Josh looked at his bloody elbow and up at his parents with tears in his eyes, ready to explode. But then, he looked up at Sean, the big brave fourth-grader he admired so much. There would be no coming back from this embarrassment if he acted the way he usually did. So the tears suddenly disappeared. Josh looked at his elbow and smiled and laughed; he stood up, brushed himself off and went right back to playing with Sean. Josh's family was speechless – the same child who cried if you tied his shoes too tight just looked at an open wound and laughed it off.

From that moment on, the frail melancholic Josh was gone. He became more extraverted and adventurous, doing push-ups every night before bed and taking up rock climbing. In every situation, he became the exuberant goofball he felt like he could be around Cale's friends. All it took was a little bit of healthy fear of embarrassment and someone to admire to give him the confidence to overcome his anxiety and frailty. Josh had always been tough – he just needed the right incentive to realize it.

MOTHER'S DAY COMPLEXITIES

Emily wishes she could disappear on Mother's Day. Although Sharon, the woman her father married two years after her mother died, tries to be good to her, on days like this it's hard to even look at her. Emily, age 15, just wants to take a walk with her mother, and maybe stop at the bookstore,

where her mother would select a book for her holiday present and a proud young Emily would pay for it with her babysitting money. Her brother Jake, age 7, has an easier time with holidays because he was quite young when the car accident happened. He doesn't remember all the holiday rituals with their mother's relatives – the Thanksgiving family baseball game, the elaborate Christmas Eve dinner at her grandmother's, or the Fourth of July parade and barbeque. Her uncles told crazy jokes, her aunts told wonderful stories about growing up, and her grandmother taught Emily many of their Swedish family recipes.

When Jake's and Emily's dad remarried, Emily's family moved into Sharon's big house, about 30 miles away. Holidays are now spent with her father's family or Sharon's relatives. Although Dad will drive Emily over to see her grandmother and other relatives on Christmas morning, Jake prefers to stay with his stepbrothers to play with their toys. Sometimes, Emily feels as if she is the only person in her family who misses their old life. No one talks about Mom on her birthday or on the day she died. Emily reminds her brother, but Jake does not remember much about her. Emily fears that she will lose her precious memories of her mother.

From the moments of childhood where interactions with our peers affirm and challenge our sense of self, as was the case for Josh, to the life-changing tragedies that transform our family relationships, such as the death of Emily's mother, communication patterns serve as the foundation of family identity. Identity is represented in how we answer the question "Who am I?" or "Who are we?" We are challenged in life to understand ourselves as individuals within our web of relationships, including our family.[1] Here in Chapter 5, as we shift our focus from different lenses we might use to define and theorize family communication to how family communication creates and sustains family cohesiveness, we focus on the patterned meaning-making function of families. Through communication, family members manage their everyday lives and construct their collective identity. In order to understand the significant role that meaning plays in the

relational development of identity, we will first address how families use communication to form relational cultures. Second, we will explore how shared meanings are developed through key communication patterns, starting with family communication rules. In the remainder of the chapter, we will explore other communication patterns that contribute to family identity by focusing on family secrets, family communication networks, and family stories.

FAMILY COMMUNICATION FORMS AND RELATIONAL CULTURES

Each of us learns to interpret and evaluate behaviors within our family system while simultaneously creating a set of meanings that outsiders may not understand. For instance, one of our students shared a family ritual that started in her childhood. On Christmas Eve, her father would shout, “Carrot Time!” and the entire family would go out onto the lawn and toss carrots onto the roof of their house. This seemed an odd practice to the various friends (and later, the fiancé) she brought home for the holidays. Although Carrot Time started as a ritual for young children to provide carrots for Santa Claus’s reindeer, continuing this pattern into adulthood became a way for the family to reflect their unique family culture that valued togetherness and fun. These days, the family shares all sorts of crazy pictures of Carrot Time on social media for extended family and friends to see.

Carrot Time is one example of how a family creates and enacts a relational culture. As they communicate, family members create **relational culture**, which we defined in Chapter 1 as a shared set of meanings, expectations, and rules for interaction that contributes to creating a relatively unique communication system.[2] Some families hide eggs on Easter, say a family prayer in German before each Sunday dinner, or use certain nicknames for one another that no one outside of the family knows. Such practices represent a culture high on humor and togetherness. Conversely, some families find holidays to be frivolous and unnecessary,

and instead use holiday time to get caught up on tax preparation, sleep late, plant spring flowers, or do research for a term paper. Every family system interacts and creates its own worldview, which reflects members' shared beliefs and meanings, and undergirds the family's communication patterns, which we discussed in Chapter 2. Although family members may not identify equally with the family's worldview, nevertheless, relational cultures emerge from ongoing communication patterns as members of the family system interact to build, maintain, alter, and sometimes dissolve their relational culture.

Consider romantic partners' behaviors as they develop a new family system. Each must undergo a process of mutual accommodation evidenced by a set of **transactional patterns**, which are ways in which each member of the family motivates and monitors the behavior of the other and is influenced, in turn, by the other person's previous actions. According to family therapist Salvador Minuchin, these patterns form "an invisible web of complementary demands that regulate many family situations."[3] In one family, for instance, a father who cooks dinner each night for the family may find that his partner responds by cleaning the dishes afterward without being asked to do so, whereas in another family, reminders to have the children brush their teeth initiate a subsequent prayer time with the kids before their parents tuck them in to sleep. The communication patterns in a family system are redundant in that they help regulate the behaviors and expectations of what to expect and are altered based on feedback.[4] At times, you may not be aware of transactional patterns that emerge in your family, as some operate smoothly and mostly outside of your awareness. For example, some individuals have come to expect that their family does not often talk about what is bothering them, and initial desires to avoid awkward or difficult conversations can become transactional patterns of topic or conflict avoidance. Members of dyadic and family systems negotiate a set of common meanings as they interact over time, and this system grows as family members are added. This negotiation process is both subtle and complex.

Through communication, members of the family system strive to create mutual meanings. Similarities in physical and social interactions assure some common meanings. Although the intent of some behaviors, if not discussed, may be misinterpreted, these behaviors and a partner's interpretations become part of the relational meaning pattern. Usually, the more similar the partners' culture and family backgrounds, the less negotiation is needed. Likewise, when your behaviors are interpreted in a similar way, little communication is needed, but when you discover that your behaviors are interpreted in different ways, these interpretations need to be discussed to ensure clearer communication. For example, one of our students has recently had to work with her eight brothers and sisters to make decisions about moving their father, who has developed dementia, into a nursing home across the country. The siblings live in many different states and live independent lives. Our student, who has been doing most of the caregiving for her father for many years, was stunned and hurt to learn that two older siblings made the decision and arrangements to move their father without even asking her what she thought. The siblings did not have a relational culture and communication patterns of joint decision-making that helped them to work together in this difficult situation.

Language plays a significant role in developing a relational culture, but researchers have found that nonverbal behavior is also an important contributor to the relational culture. For instance, relationship researcher John Gottman found that distressed couples are more likely to express their negative feelings with different nonverbal behaviors; in some cases, they express contempt, powerfully indicated by eye-rolling, sarcasm, mocking, name-calling, or belligerence.[5] After decades of research on committed relationships, Gottman and his colleagues concluded that the "masters" of relationships (i.e., couples that stay together) are much gentler with one another than the relationship "disasters" (i.e., couples that break up or are chronically unhappy together).[6] Although the relational culture of family becomes more complex as new members are added, Gottman's work illustrates the importance of metacommunication for increasing understanding among members.

As a family system evolves, communication among members affects the continuously developing relationships that emerge. Over time, you develop certain meanings with each family member, and you help new family members understand your family culture. After living with these types of patterns for years, we may become so used to the “moves” that other family members make that, as soon as one person hears a predictable opening line to a family ritual or story, other family members start to move through the usual script, very much like actors in a play. However, when these patterns are interrupted, as we saw in the earlier example with the siblings who now have to make joint decisions about their father’s care, we see how these siblings need to create new communication patterns to be able to cooperate and work together.

Families do not develop well-coordinated meanings quickly, but instead may struggle for years to reach similarity in interpreting and responding to each other’s behaviors. Parents and children may live with serious misunderstandings throughout most of their lives if they do not communicate effectively with one another. For example, if two siblings sense parent favoritism, either may consciously avoid the subject or may resist the other sibling’s attempt to talk about it. Alternatively, consider the second case at the start of this chapter. Although Emily has not adjusted to the stepfamily after the death of her mother, her brother Josh has fit into the new family system and has adapted to their communication patterns much more smoothly.

With time, family meanings emerge through continuous interpretations of, and responses to, family members’ communication patterns. These patterns become predictable, forming complex sets of “moves” established through repetition that have become recognizable, at times without conscious awareness.

To understand how these family meanings emerge from developing practices, we will explore the following four areas throughout the remainder of this chapter: (a) family communication rules, (b) family secrets, (c) family communication networks, and (d) family stories.

FAMILY COMMUNICATION RULES

Over time, every family develops rules for acceptable interactions and transmits them to new members explicitly or implicitly. **Communication rules** are relationship agreements that highlight "what behaviors are required, preferred, or prohibited in various social contexts."[7] Every family becomes a rule-governed system; family members interact with each other in an organized, repetitive fashion, creating patterns that direct family life. Communication rules are both created and maintained through repetitive interactional patterns and serve to create regularity where none exists. Eventually, these rules become patterned in the family. In most cases, communication rules reflect patterns that have become "oughts" or "shoulds." For example, your family has most likely developed rules concerning revealing information about the family to outsiders. Communication scholar Sandra Petronio describes a situation where a newlywed daughter, who comes from a family that does not share private information with outsiders, marries into a family that is very open with one another.[8] She was caught off-guard and very embarrassed when she visited her new husband's family and he started telling them about the couple's private conversations about whether they wanted to have children. She was very upset at her husband, and he was having trouble understanding what all the fuss was about, as his family always came to each other to talk about big decisions. You might be able to recognize your own family in the experience of this young wife or perhaps the husband. What communication rules has your family developed over time? And how did you come to know these rules?

Because of their regularities, communication rules serve a powerful function in coordinating meanings for people. Through rules, family members enact structures that enable them to develop mutual understanding and some sense of a shared reality. Family communication rules may be identified further as constitutive or regulative.[9] **Constitutive rules** define "what counts as what" and help family members understand why they

should not do or say something. For example, “It is polite to ask to be excused from the dinner table when you have finished your meal,” “You should ‘friend’ your sister on Facebook because she is family,” or “You should call Grandfather on his birthday as a sign of respect” are all constitutive rules. Essentially, these rules determine meanings because they tell members how to recognize and interpret speech acts, such as “You need to work harder,” which may be based on a family rule such as “We should give 100 percent effort to what we do.” Using constitutive rules, families teach what counts as affection (e.g., in some families, members kiss and hug, but in other families, affection is conveyed through gift-giving), what counts as conflict (e.g., some families debate openly and endlessly without viewing it as conflict, whereas others consider a minor difference of opinion to be a major fit), what counts as staying in touch (e.g., some families touch base daily whereas others may do so monthly or only when needed), and so forth.

Regulative rules prescribe acceptable communication behavior: how, when, where, and with whom to talk. Members of the Rosario family hear, “Text me or your sister whenever your plans change, even if it is a small change”; members of the Williams family learn, “Always greet older family members directly when you return home” and “Do not disagree with your father about your curfew time.” Families may also develop special rules applicable to specific contexts. For example, when a family member is diagnosed with a genetic disease, the family may establish rules about who can talk about this and under what conditions.[10] In another example, family members might all agree to refrain from talking about their homelessness in order to protect the teenage siblings from embarrassment.

The Development of Communication Rules

How did you learn your family’s communication rules? You learned some explicitly and other rules implicitly, often when rules were violated. The couple who found they have very different rules about revealing private information to their families of origin did not develop their own explicit

rules until after that fateful dinner when their families started debating the couple's intentions to have children. Rule formation varies on an awareness continuum, ranging from very direct, explicit, and conscious rules that may have been clearly negotiated, to the implicit, unspoken, unconscious rules emerging from repeated interactions. Explicit rules are straightforward and are negotiated or communicated directly, such as "We will never go to bed without kissing goodnight" or "We will openly discuss sex with the children." For example, researchers studying children of alcoholic fathers found that if these children are encouraged to express their feelings and discuss their fears and insecurities with the other parent, they are less likely to experience diminished self-esteem.[11] Whereas explicit rules are usually clearer, implicit rules may be much more complex, as we may not know we have violated the rule until someone is upset with us. Some rules take center stage in a family and develop great staying power. Individuals tend to carry their family rules into new families they form, implicitly combining those rules with their partners' family of origin rules. The challenge and task for newly formed families is to incorporate their own family rule structures and expectations into the new family.[12] If the old patterns are not questioned, they tend to pass from generation to generation. Partners coming from family systems with dissimilar rules experience greater struggles, forcing them to address their differences. Consider the difficulties if two people bring to their marriage the following individual rules for behavior during a family argument:

Partner 1: If one person expresses strong negative emotion, the other should consider it carefully and refrain from a spontaneous response. This is considered thoughtful.
Partner 2: If one person expresses strong negative emotion, the other should respond with emotional supportiveness. To avoid responding would indicate rejection.

You can imagine the process of implicit and explicit rule negotiation needed for these two people to develop a disagreement pattern with which both feel

comfortable. What makes this especially complicated is that these rules brought in from the family of origin are most likely implicit; something the family did but never discussed. Can you think of an example of an implicit rule from your family of origin that you were unaware of until someone broke the rule?

Ethnic backgrounds also influence family rules. For example, when sibling conflict occurs, many Asian parents will admonish the younger child for not respecting the older sibling and admonish the older child for not being a good role model. Essentially, the family rule is to avoid conflict and to respect elders.[13] Members of Irish families learn to "Keep your feelings to yourself"[14] because the Irish often have difficulty dealing with interpersonal disagreements with relatives and friends, so many first- and second-generation Irish living in the United States protect secrets more than immigrants from other cultures. Members of Polish families learn, however, that stubbornness works unless you are fighting with a parent.[15]

Analysis of any rule-bound system requires an understanding of the mutual influence patterns within which the rules function and which create new relational patterns. Once rules are established, changing any one rule may be complicated and time-consuming unless the family has a flexible adaptation process and can recognize that the rule no longer serves a useful function. We also need to realize that we may not always know if all rules are followed. For example, researchers found that parents believed adolescents followed their rules concerning tobacco use and sexual abstinence more than adolescents actually did.[16] Thus, it is important that family members talk about and follow up on their rule expectations.

Rules are maintained or changed through the negative (maintenance) or positive (growth) feedback processes from systems theory that we discussed in Chapter 1. Rules may be recalibrated explicitly and implicitly as family members pass through certain developmental stages. For example, privacy rules change as children age. We do not expect young children to have much privacy, but adolescents often expect not to have to tell their parents where they are at all times.[17] Rules may also be openly negotiated or

changed as the result of various factors, such as member dissatisfaction. A teacher's suggestion to "Encourage Patrick to stand up for his own opinions" may affect a parent's willingness to listen to a son's arguments.

Old patterns shift as the family system recalibrates itself to accept a wider variety of behaviors and people. A daughter may come to realize that "I broke our family's rule about not discussing sex with my mother when I openly talked about my living arrangement with my boyfriend." Some family rule changes reflect social shifts. Although adoption used to be highly secretive and adoptees rarely talked with those outside of the family about being adopted, if they were even told they were adopted, the increase in open adoptions renders it a far more transparent, discussable experience.[18]

Most rules exist within a hierarchy, with some more important in one family system than another. Two families may each establish the rule "Do not swear." In the Parson family, it may be a critical concern, whereas the Coopers may see this as a rule you should try to follow. Once you learn the family rules, you must also figure out the importance placed on each of them, which rules can be violated or not, and what the consequence of following or violating rules will likely be.

Conflict occurs when a family member breaks rules that they did not realize existed, as oftentimes occurs when rules are implicit. More often than not, implicit rules are guidelines or expectations from the broader culture that may or may not be understood or followed within a particular relationship.[19] Such conflicts frequently arise for in-laws or newly formed stepfamilies. For example, one of our students, who was a stepchild from a family with very open and flexible boundaries, was chastised by her new stepmother for entering the parents' bedroom without knocking. Because the child had unlimited access to her parents' bedroom before the divorce, she had broken a rule that she never knew existed. This is one example of how families vary in both the importance they place on family rules and in their enforcement of family rules.

Importance of Rules and Enforcing Rules

It is through rule-bound interaction that families enact their primary and secondary family functions. Rules set the limits of cohesion and adaptability and influence the management of a family's images, themes, boundaries, and positions on biosocial issues such as power and gender. Family development over time influences further rule development. The interaction of rules and family functions supports the development of a family's identity. A rule that the family does not discuss problems with those outside of the family allows the family to protect itself and present the image they want to others. Rules provide stability in interactions and serve to socialize younger members or those who join the family through adoption or partnership/marriage. It is not unusual for a person to clue his fiancée in on family rules as she comes to meet his parents for the first time in an effort to have this meeting go well.

Key questions provide a framework for looking at types of communication rules: What can be talked about? How can it be talked about? And with whom can it be talked about? Each family's rules differ on the issues of what can be discussed. Can death, sex, salaries, drugs, and serious health problems be talked about in the Martinez family? Are there family skeletons in the Adams family or current relatives who are never mentioned? Contrary to open or high conversation oriented families, in some families, certain topics may be forbidden under certain circumstances. For example, one student from a post-divorce family recently described his father's house as being a place where lots of unspoken rules dictated unsafe topics of conversation, such as his mother, his mother's relatives, old family vacations, or the way the family used to celebrate holidays.

Over time, family members become quite strategic in their use of (or failure to use) family rules. They learn how to talk about a particular topic or issue either directly or indirectly. In a family with an alcoholic parent, a parent or older sibling may say, "Mom's not feeling well today," but no one says, "Mom is drunk." Many couples never draw up a will because one or both partners cannot find a way to talk directly about death. Thus, the question "How can it be talked about?" may involve vague allusions to the

topic or euphemisms such as, “If anything ever happens, I know you’ll take care of everything.”

Circumstances also affect communication rules and how they are enacted. You may learn not to talk about money when your mother has a tough day at work. Some topics seem to be discussed in a certain physical location, such as the kitchen or the car. One father would find excuses to take a drive with his daughter as she seemed more receptive to what he had to say when they were driving in the car.

Often, the rules for who can participate in the conversation reflect some of the biosocial issues we mentioned in Chapter 2, such as age, gender, or family role. When children are small, they may be excluded from financial discussions, but as they grow older or if serious financial problems arise, they enter the conversations. Sometimes unforeseen circumstances, such as death or divorce, move a child into conversations on previously off-limits topics. A 14-year-old daughter of a single parent may discuss topics with her parent that would not have arisen if another adult lived in the home.

Finally, in order to fully appreciate the “what,” “how,” and “who” of a family’s communication rules, we can analyze which rules are enforced in certain contexts. For instance, researchers have studied how parents and adolescents develop rules for social technology use (i.e., cell phones and social networking sites) based on who is more of an expert with a particular technology. Adolescents discussed both their parents’ *access rules*, or when and how often adolescents were allowed to use social technologies, and *content rules*, which referred to the kinds of information they were permitted to post or transmit. They also described different *enforcement strategies* that parents used based on whether they or their parents were thought of as the “expert” for a specific social technology.[20] As this research reveals, different families may develop and enforce different rules depending on a variety of factors, not the least of which include how the family manages personal information about its members and how it networks with others outside of the family.

BOX 5.2 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What types of communication rules has your family developed over time?
2. How did you come to know these rules? How many of them did you learn implicitly and how many of them did you learn explicitly?
3. Which communication rules from your family of origin, if any, might you keep if you begin a family of your own one day? Which rules will you exclude?

FAMILY SECRETS

A second way in which families communicate to socially construct and maintain a family identity is through information management, specifically, through family secrets. **Family secrets** involve information purposefully hidden or concealed by one or more family members. The issue of family secrets emerges when one considers the link between powerful family rules and taboo topics. For example, a common communication rule in alcoholic families, such as “Don’t talk, don’t feel,” provides a way to maintain or deny the problem.[21] Family secrets create critical communication concerns because family ties are influenced by what family members disclose and by what is held secret.[22] A family’s interaction patterns shape how family members make, keep, and reveal secrets. In many cases, secrets are passed silently and unknowingly from generation to generation like “a booby-trapped heirloom.”[23] Family members often withhold secrets from one

another if they perceive they will be punished for raising concerns.[24] This is referred to as the chilling effect, a concept that we will explore further in Chapter 10. For now, let's take a moment to look more closely at how the chilling effect influences the revelation and withholding of family secrets in the following "Family Matters."

BOX 5.3 FAMILY MATTERS: THE CHILLING EFFECT IN FAMILIES AND THE PRESSURE TO CONCEAL SECRETS

Although there are many reasons why family members might keep secrets from one another, communication researchers Tamara Afifi and Loreen Olson were interested in the degree to which family members feel pressured to conceal secrets because of the coercive power or aggression of the family members from whom the secrets are being kept. Their research on the **chilling effect**, which refers to the tendency of individuals to withhold complaints and avoid confrontation with their partner or with other family members for fear of reprisal, compared two potential explanations for how expressions of coercive power influence decisions to conceal secrets. In the direct effects model, they theorized that coercive power directly influences family members' concealment by suppressing the desire to reveal sensitive information for fear of negative consequences. In the indirect effects model, however, they suggested that coercive power might reduce family members' closeness and commitment to one another, which in turn compels them to continue concealing their secret.

After surveying members of 171 families (totaling more than 600 individuals), Afifi and Olson found more support for the direct effects model than for the indirect effects model. Specifically, coercive power emerged as a positive predictor of family members' continued concealment of the secret. Likewise, coercive power was inversely

associated with family members' closeness and commitment to each other, but closeness and commitment did not mediate (or help explain) the association between coercive power and continued concealment. Based on their findings, Afifi and Olson concluded that the chilling effect may only hold true for more aggressive types of power in families. Their work demonstrates that the use of power and continued decisions to conceal (or perhaps reveal) secrets to other family members matter.

For further reading, see Afifi, T. D., & Olson, L. (2005). The chilling effect in families and the pressure to conceal secrets. *Communication Monographs, 72*(2), 192–216.

Secrets and Boundaries

Secrets create or reinforce boundaries between the family and the outside world, or around individuals or subsystems. With her communication privacy management theory that we discussed in Chapter 3, researcher Sandra Petronio portrays control as a boundary issue; we tend to view private information as owned or co-owned with others. For example, a family may have an explicit rule about not talking about family finances with those outside the family. When the first child marries, the family may struggle with opening the privacy boundary and making that new person a co-owner of financial information. Revealing private information renders one vulnerable. Family members control an exterior boundary regulating the flow of private information, such as adoption, to those outside the family,[25] and establish internal boundaries that range from high to low permeability.

For example, in one study researchers described the adoptive strategies used by White parents to protect their family privacy when individuals outside the immediate family asked questions about their adopted Chinese children.[26] Some parents indicated they do not answer questions on topics such as adoption expenses, their child's personal story, or their adoption

decision because they are considered private information. Managing family secrets effectively depends on members' ability to identify who "owns" what information. One individual may believe that certain private information belongs to her, and that other family members, who know this information, do not have the right to share it with others. When the individual's boundary is ignored, turbulence will result. For example, if a husband tells his family of origin about his brother-in-law's serious drug abuse problem, his wife may become angry because she believes her family owns the information about her sibling.

Often, family secrets are known to all immediate family members but kept from the outside world (whole family secrets), known to subgroups of the family (intra-family secrets), or known only to an individual family member (individual secrets). Although many secrets are associated with something that would hurt or embarrass one or more members, some secrets protect positive information, such as Mom's upcoming 60th surprise party or a large inheritance coming to the children.

PHOTO 5.1 Secrets may help establish strong subgroup boundaries.

Tomwang112/iStock

In the 21st century, privacy and secrecy may appear to be less relevant to younger, Westernized generations, who are active and open disclosers on social media. Society appears biased against secrecy because it values open communication, yet when it comes to privacy rules and family secrets, family members should think carefully about what to reveal and when. For instance, researchers have compared how individuals from South Korea and the United States use facework (i.e., strategies for maintaining and saving face) when family health secrets are revealed to family outsiders. Although people from both cultures displayed several similarities in how they would approach the (in)appropriate disclosure of a family health secret, three notable differences emerged. Whereas Koreans were more likely than Americans to downplay the seriousness of the health problem, to ask the outside party to withhold the secret from others, and to instruct the disclosing family member on how to share the information appropriately, Americans were more likely than Koreans to discuss disclosure rules to increase understanding (typically at a later time).[27] This study helps illustrate how family rules regarding self-disclosure and privacy often create different types of family secrets.

Types of Family Secrets

Secrets may be categorized in a variety of ways. For instance, one scholar identified four different types of family secrets: (a) sweet, (b) essential, (c) toxic, and (d) dangerous.[28] *Sweet* secrets may be fun and are usually time limited, such as a cousin's surprise baby shower. *Essential* secrets include talk about fears or insecurities, which enhances closeness and fosters the personal relationship. Some partners see self-disclosing conversations as an integral part of their relational growth. Many siblings value revealing deep concerns and fears with each other, especially in their late adolescence and

early adulthood. *Toxic* secrets poison family relationships, as they often include significant family issues and stories that remain untold and unaddressed. Maintaining such secrets has chronic negative effects on problem-solving, conversational transparency, and emotional well-being. As one scholar noted, even when a family member is not in immediate danger, "toxic secrets nonetheless sap energy, promote anxiety, burden those who know, and mystify those who don't know."[29] The protected alcoholism of one member may shut down vital interactions among other family members, as well as between these members and the outside world. Avoiding issues such as affairs, serious genetic disease, or imprisonment may inhibit interactions about other topics. Finally, *dangerous* secrets place their "owners" in immediate physical jeopardy or cause such severe emotional turmoil that it threatens the owners' capacity to function. These may involve physical or sexual abuse or threats of suicide or harm to others.

Functions of Secrets

Given the commonplace nature of family secrets, a key question arises: What functions do secrets serve? In her early work on whole family secrets, communication scholar Anita Vangelisti reported six functions of such secrets:[30]

1. *Bonding*: Family secrets increase cohesiveness among family members. The sister who tells her mother that David is at their temple's youth group meeting when he is actually out with friends may feel the bond with her brother strengthening. Most couples keep their sexual rituals private. Sharing certain family secrets with new members, such as in-laws, acknowledges their place in the family.[31]
2. *Evaluation*: Family secrets help members avoid negative judgment. Parents may hide a child's sexual preference from elderly relatives or a partner's multiple divorces to avoid negative evaluations of their family.

3. *Maintenance*: Some secrets help keep family members close while protecting them from stressors. Unusual religious practices, reliance on a sperm donor, or an unexpected inheritance may be kept a secret to prevent outside pressures and internal anxieties.
4. *Privacy*: Some secrets appear to be personal and/or irrelevant to others. Family members frequently view income, plans for pregnancy, their salaries, or payments for major purchases as no one else's business.
5. *Defense*: Volatile secrets protect information from outsiders who might use it against family members. Enmeshed families rely more heavily on secrets as a means of defending the family against that information getting out. For instance, one author discussed how his now-deceased father's experience as a CIA spy was kept a family secret to protect his father.[32] Some health issues become volatile secrets; a parent's diagnosis with Huntington's disease frequently remains secret in order to protect the individual and other members' potential genetic inheritance. Today, many families with members who entered the United States illegally teach children never to reveal this information.
6. *Lack of Communication*: Having multiple secrets reflects a general lack of open communication among family members. In families with low verbal interaction, certain topics may never surface because the family is closed or no one would know how to talk about them.

These functions have direct links to revelation choices. For instance, people who are unlikely to reveal their family secrets strongly support functions associated with evaluation, maintenance, privacy, and defense.[33]

Secrets and Family Patterns

Secrecy is also associated with family change. Although the creation or revelation of a secret can occur at any moment, many secrets are created or revealed at periods of intense relationship change, such as marriage, divorce, birth of a child, leaving home, or death. Secrets that emerge during key developmental points tend to affect the family's developmental process.

Relationships with the potential to change and grow become frozen, as a powerful secret locks people in place.[34]

Secrets reinforce boundaries across various family forms. Stepfamily members often share secrets with the members of their family of origin while concealing the same secrets from other stepfamily members.[35] Former partners and co-parents face the task of creating joint rules for communicating with their children about their post-marital romantic relationships since former partners often have different expectations for secrecy around this topic.[36] In LGBTQIA+ families, the act of keeping secrets may be considered less taboo; a recent study of romantic relationship secrets revealed that gay and lesbian partners are willing to keep significantly more secrets than straight partners.[37] The researchers speculated that one reason for this finding is that LGBTQIA+ individuals have a cultural history of keeping secrets, due to cultural prejudice and discrimination. In other familial relationships, adult secrets about a family member's imminent death may create a boundary between adults and children, resulting in the children feeling isolated from what is happening.[38]

As noted earlier, multigenerational communication patterns frequently involve managing secrets. A hidden suicide, abortion, or prison term affects the communication patterns of future generations. Someone may struggle with questions such as: Do I have the right or responsibility to keep this a secret? Who would be injured if I reveal this secret? In a study of three-generation families of Holocaust survivors, for example, one scholar found that a conspiracy of silence affects what topics survivors and their descendants can and cannot discuss because, when the past is avoided, grandchildren do not need to confront emotionally loaded issues. But, by avoiding the topic, grandchildren and great-grandchildren may separate themselves from the subject and may create distance from their ancestors. Clearly, family secrets affect not only current family members, but also future generations of the family as well.

Persons affected with certain illnesses, like HIV, confront painful choices as they consider revealing the illness, fearing rejection, isolation, and

harassment by coworkers, acquaintances, friends, and other family members.[39] Revelation within the family also involves great consequences and challenges. Three reasons mothers decide to disclose their HIV status to their children include (a) trying to educate them, (b) needing their children to hear it *from them*, and (c) believing the children should know before their mother becomes very ill. Yet some mothers opt for secrecy because, in addition to reasons of age and maturity level, they do not want their children to bear the emotional burden, to experience rejection, or to fear losing their mother.[40] Given the prominent role that many mothers fulfill as family kinkeepers,[41] family secrets can affect how information moves between and among family members within the family's communication network.

BOX 5.4 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. Identify a secret that members of your family are keeping (or one that they previously kept). What type of secret was it? How was the secret managed communicatively?
2. Looking back over your childhood, how many of your family secrets were sweet secrets? How many were essential? Toxic? Or dangerous?
3. Considering the different functions of family secrets, which functions were most common for your family's secrets?

FAMILY COMMUNICATION NETWORKS

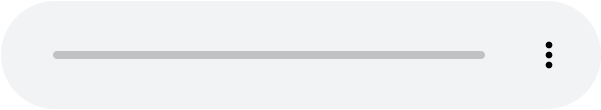
A **family network** refers to a group of people within a family system who have established a pattern of connecting through social interaction. Although multiple interpretations of this term exist and we cannot cover every kind of family network, we will focus on family networks that include those related by (a) blood or adoption, (b) marriage (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandparents), and (c) voluntary ties.[42] As we talk about these networks, we include both face-to-face and technological networks that family members create and manage. Such family networks reveal members' connections and disconnections along relatively stable communication pathways.

Family members regulate the direction of message flow throughout the network, as well as the message recipients. Some members participate actively in these networks; others participate infrequently or reluctantly. **Horizontal communication** occurs when the persons involved in the interaction possess equal status or power, as when siblings share messages or when parents and adult children work out problems together. **Vertical communication** occurs when real or imagined power differences characterize the interactions.

Families develop networks to manage members' connections and other relational tasks, such as conveying instructions, maintaining secrets, organizing activities, regulating time, sharing resources, and keeping others up to date on personal thoughts and activities. High member adaptability implies a wide variety of network arrangements; low adaptability implies rigid networks.

Families operate within networks that range from high technological connection to high face-to-face connection. Some families stay in touch primarily through face-to-face interactions because members live in close proximity and, in many cases, certain technology is too expensive or family members' skill levels limit access. In other families, relatives may stay in touch almost exclusively through technology, such as talking or texting via cell phones, or other online resources, such as e-mailing, blogging, Zooming, and using social media. The shift from household phones to personal mobile phones and smartphones is part of the shift to networked

families.[43] A group of communication researchers studied the role of family kinkeepers in 1996 and 20 years later to understand the role of technology in keeping families in touch.[44] Not surprisingly, technology dominated family interaction as families were increasingly reliant on largely mediated communication channels of text, telephone, e-mail, and social media. Technological connections are particularly important when family members are geographically dispersed, residing across the country or globe, so that face-to-face interaction is quite limited. Today, most families exist within multigenerational, highly complex networks.



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Networks and rules operate with mutual influence: Rules may dictate the use of certain networks, whereas networks create certain rule patterns. For example, a young woman may ensure that she and her fiancé call their parents when they become engaged before putting that information up on social media, understanding that their parents would be upset if they did not hear the information first. Two sisters may use text messaging as a way to keep in touch about most things, whereas they may call their brother to catch up but only when they have big news to share, or they may insist on telling important things to their parents but only in person.

Face/Voice Network Interactions

Although mediated connections increasingly affect family interactions, face-to-face and direct voice connections remain critical in family life, especially for families with children at home. These families tend to operate using interpersonal network models that include (a) the chain, (b) the Y, (c) the wheel, and (d) the all-channel network.

An operating *chain network* occurs when family members talk along a series of links; chains may be vertical (power-driven hierarchy) or horizontal (equal-power connection). Usually, a parent heads a hierarchy, whereby messages move down the chain from parent to an older child and

then, onto younger children; requests from younger children travel up the chain. Horizontal chains, often used for efficiency, occur when one sibling relays information to another sibling who passes it on to a third. Chains keep certain members from interacting directly. In the *Y network*, a key person channels messages from one person on a chain to one or more other family members. An inverted Y might involve a domineering grandmother who rules her son, who relays her wishes to his children.

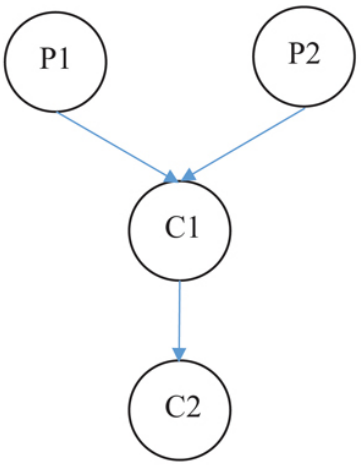
In the *wheel network*, a kinkeeper serves as the clearinghouse, or the hub of the wheel, who relays messages to other family members.[45] This position confers power and control since the key figure can filter and adapt messages positively or negatively. Yet it pressures the central figure to manage multiple messages continually. Because only one person communicates with all the others, this person becomes critical to ongoing family functioning. Internet-based mass communication (group e-mails, Facebook posts, etc.) has reduced the practical need for such a central figure, although some individuals who thrive in this position attempt to maintain their power.

Frequently, messages in chain, Y, and wheel networks may become distorted as they pass from one person to another. The *all-channel network* facilitates exchanges between or among the whole family, supporting direct interaction and maximizing immediate feedback (see Figure 5.1). Most families employ a variety of networks. When special circumstances occur, such as a seriously ill child, members may establish formal patterns for keeping others informed. For example, after a divorce, family members must establish new networks, often involving additional members, although former networks may disappear. Communication researcher Aimee Miller studied how divorced co-parents negotiate telling the former spouse that they were dating. She found that some are very direct and tell their former spouse, and others leave it to their children to tell the co-parent.[46] As her work illustrates, subgroups and coalitions directly affect family networks. Observers can frequently locate the family networks by identifying who has access to what information, such as secrets, although revealing a toxic secret may destroy an established network pattern.[47]

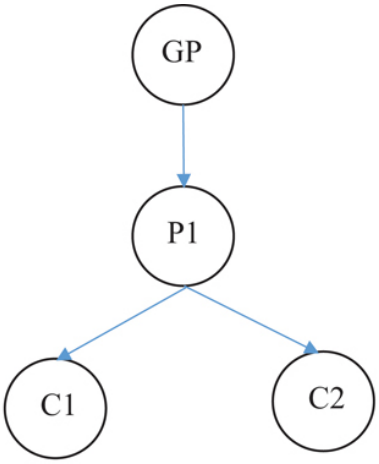
Many families maintain active, large networks. When an elderly parent becomes ill, it often triggers many phone calls, e-mails, or tweets between members of the immediate and extended family.[48] Technological innovations, which we discuss further later, have increased the ways that family members receive updates when one member becomes ill. For example, families can create personalized pages on websites such as Lotsa Helping Hands[49] or CaringBridge,[50] wherein they can post health updates, and family and friends can post encouraging messages or volunteer from a list of tasks needed to help the ill individual.

New Media and Family Communication Networks

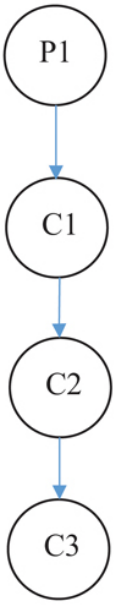
Today, family members rely heavily on mediated interaction to stay connected on any given day. We can see an ever-expanding list of technology available to many (though not all) families, including e-mail, smartphones, text messaging, social media, blogs, webcams, digital photography, and video chat.[51] Technological innovations represent a shift in family interactions that is occurring within a large network of social connections created on the Internet and through social media, such as X, formerly known as Twitter, or Instagram. If you think about it, your communication with other family members is likely to occur in multiple ways: through intentional connections, such as an e-mail directed to a brother; through assumed connections, such as the belief that your in-laws will read about your upcoming trip on Facebook; and through random connections, such as when your former sister-in-law or grandmother responds to your recent Facebook post after seeing your beach party pictures. Which technologies, if any, are different members of your family using at present? Each of these different technologies have their advantages and disadvantages as family members seek interaction and relational maintenance.[52]



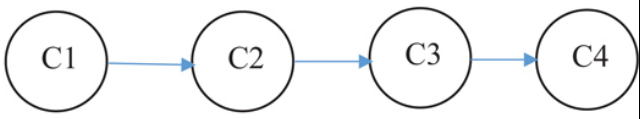
Y Network



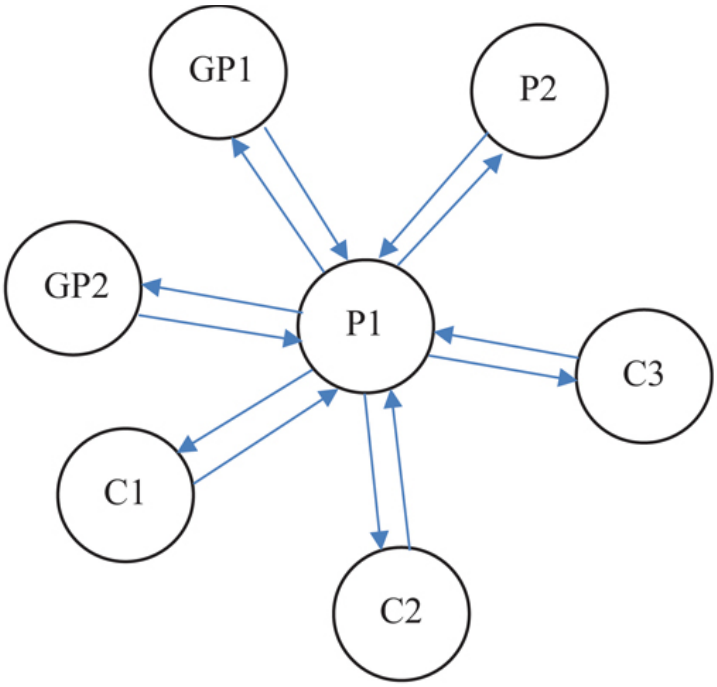
Inverted Y Network



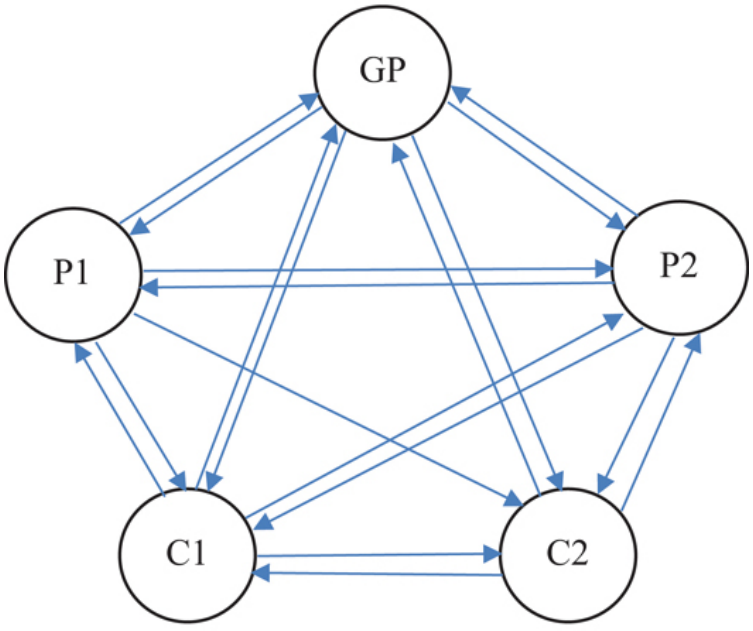
Vertical Chain Network



Horizontal Chain Network



The Wheel Network



The All-Channel Network

FIGURE 5.1 Different Types of Interpersonal Networks.

Note. GP = grandparent. P = parent. C = child.

Networked families use a wide range of mediated channels to develop, enact, and change family relationships.[53] A digitally connected world even changes how families are created. Increasingly, adults meet their romantic partners through online social networks; geography and friends or family no longer dominate romantic connections.[54] Internet dating sites provide millions of users with access to, communication with, and matching suggestions for potential compatible partners.[55] The technological advances of the past 25 to 30 years have transformed everyday family interaction patterns. Networked families can interact in mediated ways to create and maintain family ties and, at the same time, these communication channels have the same potential for harm as face-to-face communication.[56] Social media scholar Andrew Ledbetter points out that family members may use certain media to communicate with the whole family, as well as more private channels, like a personal text, with family members with whom they have stronger ties.[57] Contacting family members through social media and other communication technologies provides opportunities for everyday conversations, problem-solving, schedule management, tracking health issues, and sharing affection.

Given the relatively recent development and adoption of networked family experiences, there are likely more misconceptions than firm knowledge concerning family communication and technology use. As researchers continue to investigate the intersections of family interaction and technology use, it is important that family members develop expertise on various technologies and consider carefully which should be used with and by different family members, especially children.[58]

BOX 5.5 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What type of interpersonal network model best describes your family's network?
2. How has your family's communication network changed over time due to developmental changes in the family?
3. How has communication technology changed the ways in which your family members stay in touch? How has it enhanced or inhibited communication and connectivity among family members?

FAMILY STORIES

One final area in which communication patterns help shape a family's identity is in the stories that are told. You may recall from Chapter 3 that family stories are central to family identity, as they both affect and reflect family relationships. More than 30 years ago, education scholar Gordon Wells argued that "storying" is a way of "making meanings" – that is, when storying "is given expression in words, the resulting stories are one of the most effective ways of making one's own interpretation of events and ideas available to others."[59] Likewise, communication researchers Jody Koenig Kellas and April Trees argued that "We are born into family stories."[60] How often have you heard comments in your family that sound something like these? "Uncle Wayne, tell us how Mom drove her car into the lake because she could not find the brake," or "My grandmother told us stories about the caring teachers who taught in the segregated school she attended while living in Alabama, because they encouraged her to go to college. She

motivated me to become a professor." Such stories give meaning to everyday life.

Stories can be defined as narratives that provide a history or retelling of what was experienced by family members. These may include ancestor stories, memories of good or bad times shared by current family members, or recounting of everyday life experiences. **Accounts** refer to other kinds of narratives that provide explanations or reasons for people's behaviors or situations; they may include explaining why a family member chose to divorce, decided to join the military, or retired at age 50.

Many family members share a **master narrative**, which is a story of extraordinary proportions that is known to all members of the family and that serves to define what it means to be a family member. Often, these are linked to larger-than-life individuals who took unimaginable risks or achieved a seemingly unattainable goal. A master narrative may include a story about Holocaust survival told by grandparents and passed on by grandchildren, a cousin's immigration from Syria, the self-made success story of a great uncle who founded a business that today employs 24 family members, or the grandmother who took in foster children for 30 years. In contrast is a less dramatic but equally compelling tale of a family member who did the "right thing" by supporting three children whom his wife would not let him see or who exhibited tremendous resolve by completing a college degree at age 86. Such powerful narratives serve as life guides for other members.

Stories hold tremendous power because an individual's sense of self is embedded within the story that a person has created about the self from the totality of their experiences.[61] Individual stories may "fit" with other family stories or may serve to separate a member from the family. For example, as a foster child, Aisha told stories about her biological father that her foster family struggled to believe. Once voiced, stories develop a life of their own, taking on additional meanings beyond the first telling. You may embellish a story to turn a family member into a hero and alter another story to save a family member from embarrassment. Each retelling places a slightly different "spin" on the tale. In essence, stories do not just reflect life; stories

shape family life with powerful effects. Before we turn our attention to the functions of stories and consider what stories do for families, let's take a brief moment to learn how family stories shaped and influenced Dr. Jody Koenig Kellas's identity as a family communication scholar in this "Family Portrait."

BOX 5.6 FAMILY PORTRAIT: DR. JODY KOENIG KELLAS, UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA – LINCOLN

Dr. Kellas' website https://www.jodykoenigkellas.com/

What drew you to study family communication?

I was fortunate enough to be a student in Dr. Kathy Galvin's family communication class at Northwestern University. I had the aha moment so many communication students do. I thought, "This is what I want to study! These are my people!" and pursued the topic.

What are your main areas of family scholarship?

In my research lab, Narrative Nebraska, I focus on family storytelling, using my communicated narrative sense-making theory. We study links between storytelling and well-being for individuals, relationships, and

interactions. We study how to help parents make sense of parenting difficulties and how to help families cope with cancer, grief, and loss.

How has your own family influenced what you teach and study?

Growing up, my family of origin lived in eight different places. Without extended family nearby, we have always been a very close family unit. We tell a lot of stories – daily on the phone or sitting around the dinner table. When my dad died of pancreatic cancer, I found a passion for helping others understand and cope with loss through storytelling. As a mom of two kids, I study how to communicate as a parent and how to parent in community through sharing stories. I bring that curiosity into translational research to help parents.

How can family communication students use your research in their own family life?

Telling stories is important for families in constructing identity, socializing members to meanings, values, and beliefs, and coping with difficulty. You can start by initiating family storytelling. Pay attention to how you tell stories, as those richer in meaning-making and framed positively, even stories about difficulty, are associated with individual and family well-being. Paying attention to the content and process of family stories, you can connect, make sense of things, and even improve your well-being.

Functions of Stories

Stories convey important messages to family members while serving the following key functions: (a) to remember, (b) to create belonging and family identity, (c) to teach expected behavior and deeply held values to

current and future members, (d) to develop the family culture, (e) to connect generations, (f) to manage stress, and (g) to entertain.[62]

PHOTO 5.2 Some family stories can be told only by one key member.

Tyler Olson/Shutterstock

Family stories encourage members to remember together. Remembering connects siblings as they age, helping them recall key people or moments in their shared lives. Through stories, family members construct and reaffirm their identities, which are part of a self-definition, and the family reminds members of what it means to share a common group identity.

Stories also construct bridges that connect generations, creating a sense of history that gives younger members a place in the world. Family stories instruct members in the family values, or themes, and what is expected of them. Such stories contain moral or practical lessons. For instance, in a study of family legacies, scholars identified three themes of positive family legacies that included (a) hard work, (b) caring for others, and (c) family

cohesion, whereas participants tended to reject negative stories as family legacies.[63] Stories reflecting themes such as care, togetherness, or adaptability are positively associated with family satisfaction, whereas themes such as disregard, hostility, or chaos are negatively associated with family satisfaction.[64] Frequently, stories reflect family themes, such as "Only your best is good enough," and they socialize new members to the family. The prospective in-law may hear all about the family's journey from Costa Rica to Texas or about eccentric Grandpa Joe. Stepfamily members socialize each "side" to some family history because these stories serve as a connection that holds people together as they create their own joint stories.[65]

Family stories help family members to remember the good or bad times that contributed to current situations. Some families tell disaster stories that include surviving floods, bankruptcy, or an earthquake. Survivors of the massive Hurricane Sandy, which flooded the New Jersey shore in 2012, will share their stories with their children and grandchildren about how community members and outsiders bonded together to support their families. Such stories convey the importance of serving others. Family stories also connect people to their cultures. For instance, African American parents tell family stories to teach their children how to deal with racism.[66] Members of families formed through international adoption tell stories as a way to provide a straightforward history, as well as to discourage fantasies that children may have about their birth parents.[67] Finally, family stories evoke joy or laughter as members remember special times or embarrassing moments.

As you might imagine, family stories present unique challenges for members of highly complex family forms. Members of stepfamilies tend to avoid telling many of their family of origin stories because not everyone shares those stories and, in many cases, the stories serve as reminders of a difficult period. In addition, adoptive, foster, same-sex partners, and stepfamilies often must do extra "narrative work" in order to help children come to terms with the family form and their place in it.[68] Members may

share some family of origin stories in order to explain comments or behaviors that new step-relatives would not easily understand. On the other hand, certain stories about biological extended family members or family events shared before the stepfamily formed may be avoided because they only have meaning to certain members or they may make members of the new family uncomfortable. Despite the challenges that come with telling certain stories in complex family forms, all families tend to use stories to address fundamental questions about a family's social reality and collective identity.

Questions Stories Answer

A family develops stories that represent its collective experience. These are frequently tied to primary and secondary family functions. Family stories create responses to questions such as

- *Are parents really human?* Children love to hear stories in which parents struggle with issues of growing up or making decisions – stories that remove a parent figure from a pedestal. Some are humorous, such as when Mom "lost" her baby brother, and some are serious, such as a stepfather's struggle with drug addiction. Some stories, including parental disclosures about their youthful mistakes, may be told for the first time only when a child is old enough to learn from such a story.[69] Other stories may come later in life, as when an older mother is diagnosed with breast cancer and her adult children experience a shift in roles as they struggle to talk to each other and manage who provides social support.[70]
- *How did this family come to be?* Most families tell some version of "creation" stories. These may be first meetings of adult partners, birth stories, the first stepsiblings' meetings, or adoption stories. Such stories provide accounts of how the current family came to be. For instance, the NBC show *This is Us* toggles back and forth between the early years of when the Pearson family was formed and the present

day realities of three midlife siblings with families of their own; how Jack and Rebecca Pearson became a family of five when they went from expecting their first child to having twins and adopting a third child on the day of the twins' birth, to the present day relationships and challenges of siblings Kevin, Kate, and Randall as they make sense of who they are in light of their family of origin. Although *family formation* stories create good feelings in the listeners, they can stir up painful feelings in others. On occasions when former and current family members come together, such as weddings, funerals, and special birthdays, many adults find it hard to overhear the "how we met" stories told by an ex-spouse about their second partner. Similarly, children from a first marriage might not want to hear their stepsiblings tell wonderful stories about how their stepfather took them on college tours before they decided where to enroll, if that father made little time for his biological children.

- *How does a child become an adult in this family?* These narratives address moments or experiences when a child moves into adulthood by accomplishing some feat: beating a parent at a sport, earning more than a parent, or solving a significant family problem. Today, many young refugees have crossed the Mediterranean Sea in order to create a better life; their children will tell these stories. The stories are poignant because they signal a passage of time and, in some cases, a parent–child role reversal. For instance, a middle-aged adult may tell of caring for a parent whose recent fall left her unable to live alone.
- *Will the family stand behind its members?* Some stories depict strong family support, or no family support, when members face stressful times or violate family norms. Through stories, family members clarify their themes about adaptability; for example, "If you leave the expected path, you will be disowned." Comments such as "No one ever mentions Aunt Hillary because she married her same-sex partner and then Granddad disowned her" serve to answer the question "Why don't you ever talk about Aunt Hillary?"

- *How does the family handle adversity?* When unpredictable crises arise, such as illness or job loss, does this family pull together or does it fall apart? Countless immigrant stories depict ancestors battling against great odds to build a new life. Stories of family members facing illness, prejudice, or economic hardships depict aggressive or passive responses. For example, a study of male prostate cancer survivors revealed consistent stories of wives as health monitors, caregivers, and supporters. One man reported, "I remember standing here with my wife and crying, having my bathrobe on in the middle of the day … and saying, 'It's just me and you against the whole world, honey'."[71]
- *What does it mean to be a (family name)?* This is a question of collective identity. There may be a master narrative that captures the essence of being a Lutz or a Watters. Family stories influence family members to make decisions in accordance with the dominant narratives, which tell these members who they are and how they should act. Some families have a master narrative that captures what it means to be a family member.

Performing Family Stories

As we explore family stories, we also need to think about the performance element: Who tells the stories, and when and where are they told? Usually, storytelling is a singular experience, but frequently, sibling pairs or small groups of family members tell particular stories together. Researchers who explore couples' storytelling have identified three types of couples according to their performance style.[72] First, *connected* couples tell stories as if they are co-owned, and dialogue overlaps as partners affirm each other's words. Second, *functional separate* couples demonstrate respect, validation, and support while engaging in individual storytelling, often of unshared experiences. The performance indicates a pair who has somewhat different lives. Third, *dysfunctional separate* couples exhibit contradiction, disagreement, and poor listening skills as the other partner tells their stories.

When couples jointly tell more coherent and expressive stories, they tend to have higher marital satisfaction, both at the time the story is told and two years later.[73] Questions from children about adoption become triggers for parents to retell stories of how this family came to be. In some cases, it is a narrative of the adoption of one member, whereas in other cases, there are multiple narratives because more than one child is adopted. In one study, researchers discussed a family in which both the father and one of the three children are adopted. By now, the parents do what they call a dance, where the father tells part of the story and the adopted child tells part of it.[74] Whereas the father of this family was adopted from Vietnam, his wife grew up in a family with multiple adopted siblings. Therefore, members of this family have multiple stories about different members that everyone in the family could tell if outsiders question the legitimacy of this family.

In an elaborate study of joint storytelling and perspective-taking among family members, Jody Koenig Kellas videotaped 58 family triads sharing stories that they told frequently and that best represented the family.[75] The stories addressed a wide range of themes, such as accomplishment, fun, tradition, culture, togetherness/separateness, and child mischief, but the most common theme was dealing with stress. Koenig Kellas found that families whose members attend to and confirm each other's perspectives during joint storytelling report "the highest feelings of family cohesion, adaptability, satisfaction, and overall family functioning."[76] Likewise, she discovered that the degree to which the family identified as a storytelling family also predicted family satisfaction and family functioning. In a related study of making sense of difficult experiences through joint storytelling, researchers explored how the family relational context relates to jointly enacted behaviors, such as engagement, turn-taking, coherence, and perspective-taking.[77] Coherence of the story and perspective-taking emerged as important behavioral predictors of relational qualities. The researchers speculated that family members who are most involved in a difficult situation may engage more actively in storytelling and that telling

difficult stories creates a more somber and less interactive storytelling environment.

Some family members develop performance patterns whereby, on cue, one person disagrees or adds the punch line either when asked or on their own. For example, a parent may ask a sibling to perform the "warning" story that has worked in the past to warn other siblings about the dangers of drug use. Couples may jointly perform "cover stories" that create an explanation to avoid hurting a mutual friend's feelings, or to make one or both partners look good.[78] Family members learn to cover for each other with narrative explanations designed to save face; a mother may develop an elaborate tale about her son falling off his bike and being injured in order to avoid a family reunion they did not wish to attend.

We must also remember that storytelling occurs in context. Storytelling to children often occurs at bedtime or in response to a trigger situation, such as a bad grade or a disloyal friend. Holidays remain classic contexts for family stories. Researchers who study Thanksgiving rituals have found that family members chronicle, or individually update, others on recent events in their lives during that holiday.[79] Members of older generations control the content of talk by encouraging chronicling from younger generations and by acting as narrators. Other common storytelling contexts include meals around the dinner table, long car trips, family parties, or any event that elicits memories, such as a wedding or funeral.

Complexities of Family Storytelling

One final note about family storytelling is worth mentioning. Although most families tell stories that achieve positive benefits, such as helping them develop family solidarity, enact family structure, and cope with stress, negative stories or an absence of stories can actually create stress.[80] Some families omit or lose certain stories over time due to family rules or painful experiences. Some families develop explicit or implicit rules, such as "Never mention that Ashley had a brief marriage before she found Alex." Such rules may occur to protect loved ones from distress or support certain

fictions (“This is Ashley’s first marriage”). Occasionally, painful personal experiences, such as military service in a war zone or the death of a toddler, “disappear.” The story about how Grandma and Grandpa met and fell in love may drop out of the family repertoire after their divorce or after Grandpa dies. In addition, some family members attempt to piece fragments of stories together into a coherent narrative to better understand their experiences. A college student whose parents divorced when he was young may put together parts of stories and photographs to picture what his early family life was like. In some cases, piecing together stories results in an inaccurate version that influences members’ personal identities, even if they are corrected.[81]

BOX 5.7 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. Identify a commonly told story within your family. What values and beliefs are reinforced each time the story is told?
2. Which of the seven functions of family stories do your family’s stories primarily fulfill?
3. How, if at all, do your family’s stories answer questions reflecting the family’s collective experience and identity?

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we explored how families develop their identity through the creation of family meanings. This process involves establishing a relational culture reflective of the interactions of partners and family members. In

addition, families communicate in patterns that contribute to the individual and collective identities of its members. These include (a) communication rules, (b) family secrets, (c) communication networks, and (d) family stories. Each contributes to unique family meanings and each factor offers insight into the multifaceted identity of a family system. As you will see throughout the remainder of this book, understanding family identity requires a closer inspection of the various communication patterns that undergird family life.

Key Words

Accounts
Chilling effect
Communication rules
Constitutive rules
Family network
Family secrets
Horizontal communication
Master narratives
Networked families
Regulative rules
Relational culture
Stories
Transactional patterns
Vertical communication

FLASHCARDS

refer to other kinds of narratives that provide explanations or reasons for people's behaviors or situations; they may include explaining why a family member chose to divorce, decided to join the military, or retired at age 50.

refers to the tendency of individuals to withhold complaints and avoid confrontation with their partner or with other family members for fear of reprisal, compared two potential explanations for how expressions of coercive power influence decisions to conceal secrets.

are relationship agreements that highlight "what behaviors are required, preferred, or prohibited in various social contexts."

define “what counts as what” and help family members understand why they should not do or say something

refers to a group of people within a family system who have established a pattern of connecting through social interaction.

involve information purposefully hidden or concealed by one or more family members.

occurs when the persons involved in the interaction possess equal status or power, as when siblings share messages or when parents and adult children work out problems together.

is a story of extraordinary proportions that is known to all members of the family and that serves to define what it means to be a family member

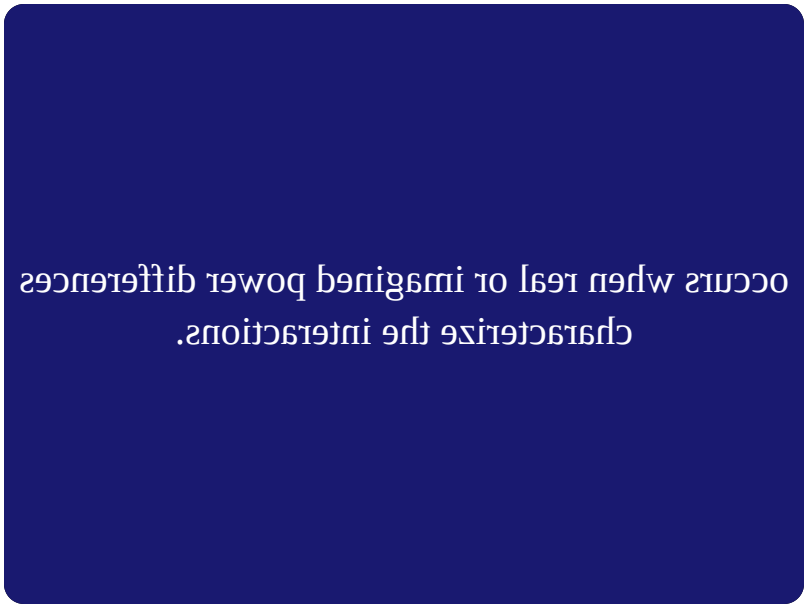
use a wide range of mediated channels to develop, enact, and change family relationships.

prescribe acceptable communication behavior:
how, when, where, and with whom to talk

a shared set of meanings, expectations, and rules for interaction that contributes to creating a relatively unique communication system

can be defined as narratives that provide a history or re-telling of what was experienced by family members.

are ways in which each member of the family motivates and monitors the behavior of the other and is influenced, in turn, by the other person's previous actions



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CHAPTER 6

Relational Maintenance Within Families

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BOX 6.1

What is relational maintenance? What is the role of communication in the relationship work we use to keep family relationships together? How do families use rituals and communication in the form of relational currencies to maintain family systems? After reading this chapter, you will be able to

1. Explain what relationship maintenance is and the role of communication in the efforts to promote and maintain families via confirmation and overcoming roadblocks to maintenance.
2. Define a family ritual and describe the function of family rituals in relational maintenance.
3. Explain the role of negative or empty rituals in families.

4. Identify the different types of relational currencies that families can draw on to maintain the family system.
5. Articulate some of the approaches and challenges to communicating to maintain partnerships/marriages, parent–child, and sibling relationships.

SEPARATION ANTICIPATION

Since they were born, identical twins Charlie and Noel have never been apart. Although the brothers have a group of friends that they hang out with, the high school seniors don't have many individual close friends. In fact, they are each other's best friend. Both play in the high school band. They have been counselors at a summer day camp and spend evenings playing basketball or video games.

When the twins think about their futures, each imagines going down quite a different road. Each has wondered how they will stay close after graduation. Noel wants to go to college at the U.S. Naval Academy and will receive a commission as a naval officer. Noel knows that at the Naval Academy, cadets have very little time to do anything but study, and they will not be able to go home much.

Charlie admires Noel's goals, but he does not have a clear idea about what he wants to do. Charlie plans to go to community college if he does not decide to take some years off to work full-time. He has been thinking about starting a band if he can find others to join him. Charlie thinks he might want to teach high school, eventually, or maybe apprentice in some lucrative trade. Sometimes, Charlie thinks Noel is pushing too hard and he should relax and have more fun while he can. On the other hand, Charlie is concerned about how he will support himself and recognizes he will likely be the brother at home as their parents and grandparents get older. Both

brothers have been thinking, and even starting to talk about how they will stay connected when Noel is away at college.

STAYING CLOSE WHILE FAR APART

When Desmond received orders to deploy to Afghanistan as part of his military service, his wife, Samiera, immediately began imagining how she and their daughters (ages 9, 7, and 5) would stay closely connected to him for the next 18 months. Samiera decided to talk with some of the other mothers living on the Army base to learn how they handled the separation. After a week of discussions, Samiera collected a list of possibilities and talked with the girls about what each one might wish to do and began to plan what she, herself, would do to stay close to their dad. Samiera and Desmond also talked about what would help him feel connected during his deployment.

Each daughter decided to fill a fancy envelope with locks of hair, photos, and drawings. The oldest daughter made a playlist for her dad. Samiera made a small photo book of wedding and family pictures and created a website he can access. Desmond decided to video-record himself reading stories that each girl liked to hear at bedtime. The girls put a map of Afghanistan and a collage of Daddy pictures on the kitchen wall. The family also started trying out different technologies they can use to communicate with each other, knowing they will likely need to make adjustments. Birthdays and holidays are a big deal for this family, and within their limited budget, Desmond and Samiera have snuck out and gone shopping for birthday and Christmas presents from Daddy, at least for the first year.

Samiera has started connecting more often with other moms living on base. She knows she will need help with the transitions ahead, especially the day when Desmond leaves for his deployment. She is trying not to think about the dangers he will face and how she might handle challenges at home without him.

What keeps family members in close, trusting relationships over the lifespan? Family connections, sometimes solid and sometimes fragile, reflect members' communicative efforts to create, navigate, and keep connections going, or to make adjustments that include increasing distance. In this chapter, first we discuss the role of communication-based relationship maintenance strategies that facilitate confirmation or disconfirmation. Second, we explore the role of family rituals in relationship maintenance. Third, we describe some of the verbal, nonverbal, and prosocial relational currencies to maintain relationships. Finally, we present approaches and roadblocks to maintaining relationships in partner and marriage, parent–child, and sibling relationships.

MAINTENANCE STRATEGIES AND CONFIRMATION

How we communicate to maintain relationships in family systems is an important topic as we reflect on how to keep families healthy and together. Scholars define relationship maintenance in different ways depending on their focus, such as keeping continuity and the relationship in good repair. We define **relationship maintenance** as behaviors people use to sustain relationships. Much of researchers' work on relationship maintenance has been focused on couple and marriage relationships and has simply been stretched to apply to family systems. Whereas the couple-related information may be relevant much of the time, there is a need for research focused specifically on maintenance in the family systems in which romantic partnerships and marriages are embedded.[1]

One caveat to remember: Although relationship maintenance usually implies keeping strong relationships strong, or helping relationships become stronger, we stressed in Chapter 1 that family relationships are not always positive. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that unsatisfying or hurtful families are also maintained.[2] As you read this chapter, keep your own

family maintenance goals in mind – what are the ideal characteristics you want your family to experience? How do you believe you and members of your family can best communicate to keep your family together and moving in a positive direction?

First, we start by paying attention to the different forms and strategies relational maintenance takes in families, focusing on the verbal and nonverbal messages – what family members say and do – that contribute to relationship maintenance. From their studies, communication researchers Dan Canary and Laura Stafford identified five relational maintenance strategies: (a) *positivity* (being affirmative and constructive), (b) *openness* (using appropriate disclosure), (c) *assurances* (messages and behaviors stressing commitment and support, (d) *sharing tasks* (actions that support equality in the division of labor), and (e) *social networks* (calling on others to support the relationship).[3] Researchers found that using these maintenance strategies helps predict strong relationships characterized by satisfaction, commitment, stability, liking, and love.[4]

Active listening is important for family members wanting to keep relationships strong. We stress *listening as active* as it takes mindful, intentional efforts to choose to listen for understanding and reflection.[5] We have all likely experienced that listening is often easier said than done in families, especially when power is unequal, for example, between older and younger generations. Family members will tend to withdraw when they perceive they are not being listened to, and this has serious negative implications on positivity.[6] Communication scholar Sally Vogl-Bauer explained, “From a pragmatic perspective, if family members have poor listening skills, their likelihood to withhold information from each other, or inhibiting conversation between family members, is probably great.”[7] To follow, we examine messages of confirmation and disconfirmation.

Confirmation

As a cornerstone of relationship maintenance, **confirmation** occurs when one person communicates in ways that validate and respect the other

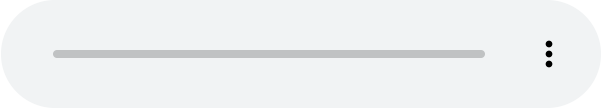
person(s).[8] Confirming messages communicate recognition and acceptance, which are fundamental preconditions to intimacy (see Chapter 7). Communication scholar Kory Floyd pointed to three types of verbal and nonverbal confirming messages: (a) *recognition* (communicate attention to others' presence or role), (b) *acknowledgement* (communicate identification of others' feelings and thoughts), and (c) *endorsement* (communicate agreement with others' perspectives).[9] For instance, you might receive a call from a family member and text them a quick "got it" message (recognition), following up with a text to indicate you understand their feelings, "I know you're frustrated with how long this is taking" (acknowledgement). Later on, you might call or stop by and visit the family member and share your level of agreement, (if that is the case), for example, "I know getting this task done is important to you and I just cannot find the paperwork for you today. I promise to make it a priority" (endorsement).

One important aspect of confirming responses is that, while they communicate acceptance of the other person, they do not necessarily mean one agrees with the other person's position on a topic at that particular point in time. That is, one can send a confirming message that communicates regard and understanding without expressing agreement.[10] For instance, in the previous example, endorsement might be, "While I don't agree with you on this 100%, I appreciate you are committed to finding a solution and I want this as well." The point here is that it is possible to communicate in a confirming way, even when we do not agree. We now turn to two aspects of confirmation that play a role in relationship maintenance: dialogue and respect.

First, **dialogue** refers to an interactive, conversational involvement between two or more persons. Verbal messages such as, "What do you think?" or "Let's set up a time to talk about this" open the door to dialogue and mutual exploration. Family members can signal concern or disagreement in a way that invites dialogue, for instance, "You know I have my doubts about this, and I do want to make sure I understand what you are thinking." Nonverbal messages such as putting down electronic devices,

making eye contact, facing the other person, or giving a “thumbs up” let the other the person(s) know you are willing to engage.

Second, **respect** involves messages and actions that demonstrate caring for others and their well-being. Respect may be directed toward an individual, a subset of the family, or the whole family system, depending on the situation. Respect involves two primary components: equality/mutuality and caring/supportiveness.[11] *Equality/mutuality* means sharing power as feasible and demonstrating value for other people, such as listening and showing consideration for other members’ choices and decisions, even when we do not fully support their choices. This includes parents encouraging children to make their own decisions appropriate to their ages, even when the parents might have another preference. For example, what happens when parents discover a child is taking a different religious path than the family? In one study, researchers found that parents may choose responses to children’s religious differences ranging from nonacceptance to ambivalence to acceptance.[12]



▶ Scripts

Families struggle with how to show respect when they disagree, especially when a member makes decisions that appear to reject family values or expectations, such as choosing to remain childless when the parents expect and want to become grandparents. To communicate a sense of equality or mutuality means that we relate in ways that hold judgmental attitudes in check.[13] This involves communicating disagreement in ways that demonstrate respect for people and their choices as much as possible.

Caring/supportiveness means engaging in “behaviors that are reciprocally thoughtful, considerate, and designed to ‘lift up’ another.”[14] Such actions may be as simple as calling a grandparent weekly or walking someone’s dog when they are in the hospital. Caring actions are often easy to do until they interfere with other plans or are costly in time, money, or

even irritation, for example, helping an uncle with computer problems over and over or at the most inconvenient times.

Another complication of caring and supportiveness would be what happens when what others expect or desire runs counter to what we believe is the right thing to do. For example, how should an adult child respond, if at all, to a parent abusing drugs or acting in abusive ways? We know that sometimes the most important way to demonstrate supportiveness is to confront behavior that is harmful to us, the family, or the person themselves.[15] Certainly, trying to find a way to show respect and communicate confirmation is preferable when possible. At the same time, families will have a bottom line when certain attitudes or behaviors cannot be tolerated, and they need to figure out appropriate actions.

Disconfirmation

Confirming messages may be contrasted with **disconfirmation**, which occurs when one person communicates with another person(s) in ways that show a lack of regard.[16] Disconfirming responses occur when a family member ignores or excludes others.[17] Disconfirmation may also involve *rejecting messages*, such as “That’s really stupid” or “Don’t act like a two-year-old,” that imply the other person is wrong or their perspective is invalid.

We do advocate for families to develop and practice norms of confirmation when at all possible. This is easy to do when families agree, share values, and have relationships that promote well-being. However, we are not expecting or advocating blanket agreement in families. One way that families navigate significant or ongoing lack of agreement is through **family estrangement**, which is acting in ways that demonstrate a lack of family intimacy, ranging from reduced interaction to relationship termination between a subset of the family or the family as a whole.[18] By and large, both researchers and practitioners focus on actions that bring estranged families back together. This is not an unworthy goal, but it is not always possible or the best thing to do.

Communication scholar Jordan Allen studied what she labeled as *functional estrangement*, where one or more family members believe family estrangement is the healthiest choice for them. For instance, a transgender family member may choose not to have contact with family members who do not accept them, and instead, they might gravitate toward voluntary/chosen family relationships (see Chapter 1). Obviously, family estrangement can be very disorienting and painful, especially when it is one-sided rather than a mutual choice. Allen and colleagues explained that estrangement can be the best option for some people and may range from reduced or controlled contact to no contact. In addition, family estrangement may not be permanent.[19]

BOX 6.2 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What is relationship maintenance? What are five relationship strategies? Which strategies have you used most recently with the best outcome in your family?
2. How can families communicate confirmation when they disagree or disapprove of another's values or actions?
3. When, if ever, would you consider not engaging in efforts to maintain a family relationship and why?

MAINTENANCE THROUGH RITUALS

A second way that family members maintain relationships over time is through the enactment of different family rituals, which you might think

about as routines or traditions. Communication scholar Judy Pearson and her colleagues observed that rituals can be beneficial to keeping families together[20] via a variety of messages and meanings that reflect emotionally powerful patterns. Taking part in family rituals reminds family members who they are and how much they care about each other, as rituals reflect a family's relational culture.

Family Rituals

Communication scholars define a **family ritual** as a recurring communication event that is voluntary and undertaken jointly by family members to honor something important in the relationship.[21] Rituals connect members in meaningful ways and have the potential to help a family system establish and maintain their family identity and relational culture.

Rituals take three forms: (a) celebrations, (b) traditions, and (c) patterned events. Think about your own family routines and traditions and identify how you have experienced each type. First, *celebrations* are events that commonly appear in a given culture, for example, weddings, funerals, or particular holidays. Although celebrations have commonalities within a culture, each family will develop their own unique practices. For example, your family may share the U.S. Thanksgiving holiday ritual, eating turkey and other menu items common to the culture. Your family may also watch American football together as many families do on Thanksgiving. At the same time, your family might have certain unique menu items or activities for Thanksgiving, for example, eating tamales or collecting canned goods for a local food bank.

Second, *traditions* are rituals that are distinctive to a particular family, for example, having an annual chili cookoff contest, remembering departed family members by visiting their graves on their birthdays, or going to the family's lake cabin the weekend before school starts for the children. Third, *patterned family interactions* are what some might call mundane or everyday rituals, such as a payday lunch at the family's favorite pizza

restaurant or doing the dinner dishes together.[22] Whereas rituals take these different forms, they function to help families with sense-making in the form of remembering, belonging, instructing, or building community. Rituals may involve whole families or family subsets (e.g., parents-children, spouses). Although it is not possible to describe all possible family rituals, they do have some overlapping features and functions. To follow, we briefly describe: (a) couple rituals, (b) intergenerational rituals, and (c) rituals involving family changes.

Couple Rituals

In addition to family system rituals, couples within the family may have their own rituals. Communication researcher Carol Bruess studied family rituals and identified rituals for couples[23] and for parents with young children.[24] To follow, we discuss the typology of couple rituals discovered in this study.[25]

- *Couple time*. These rituals highlight spending time together as a couple and include (a) enjoyable activities; (b) togetherness rituals; and (c) escape episodes that highlight sharing time, being with one another, or setting boundaries around the couple (e.g., a Friday date night, watching a favorite movie, or having a video chat before bed when the couple is apart).
- *Idiosyncratic/symbolic rituals*. These rituals are distinctive to the couple and include (a) favorites (e.g., most valued activities or places); (b) private codes (e.g., special phrases, symbols or gestures that have special meaning); (c) play rituals (e.g., racing while doing dishes or intimate fun); and (d) celebration rituals (e.g., one wife reported making her husband's favorite cake she called a "wicky-wacky chocolate cake").[26]
- *Daily routines/tasks*. These rituals involve everyday shared patterns that accomplish ordinary things, but have special meaning to the

couple (e.g., bringing the partner morning coffee, or singing show tunes while doing the dishes).

- *Intimacy expressions*. These rituals involve physical, symbolic, or verbal expressions of love, fondness, affection, or sexual attraction (e.g., lighting a special candle to express love or a desire for closeness).
- *Communication rituals*. These rituals involve verbal or nonverbal interaction, including the specific times and ways couples establish opportunities for talking, sharing, or staying in touch (e.g., a morning conversation to plan the day, regular phone calls or text messages, a regular debriefing of how a dinner party went).
- *Patterns/habits/mannerisms*. These rituals involve regular customs the couple engage in (e.g., sitting on the porch after dinner, taking the dog for a mid-morning walk).
- *Spiritual rituals*. These rituals involve couples' devotions or religious life (e.g., praying before meals or celebrating Shabbat).

Couples undertake rituals that help them maintain their relationships and keep them connected.[27] Couple rituals may also involve other family members (e.g., children) or friends. For example, the couple may undertake a bedtime ritual with their children, such as singing a special bedtime song as they walk their children upstairs to bed. Couple rituals may persist across the relationship or may change over time. For example, the couple may end the children's bedtime ritual as the children become adolescents, or they may update or replace the ritual, for example, one couple continued to sing their children's bedtime song to each other as they prepared for bed.

Many daily rituals involve interactions that, on the surface, appear to carry little meaning to those outside of the couple, but are an important function as relational maintenance. One couple referenced the dog to provide reminders without having to ask the other directly, for example, "Muffy wishes she had a strawberry shake for dessert."[28]

Whereas some rituals are frequent and mundane, other rituals are meaningful because they mark a special time in the couple's life. Leslie

Baxter and Dawn O. Braithwaite studied couples who planned and held a renewal of marriage vows, often on a landmark anniversary (e.g., 10, 25, or 40 years), and often involving special people in their lives (e.g., having their children stand up with them or including their best man from the original wedding event as their best man again). They found the couples used this vow renewal event to weave together their past, present, and anticipated future commitments with one another.[29]

As you look at all these different couple rituals, you'll notice there is no one right or most important ritual, but rather, they all with most function to please their partner, provide relational continuity, and demonstrate commitment.

Intergenerational Rituals

Some family rituals are intergenerational in nature, functioning to maintain family identity and connection across ages and generations. Intergenerational rituals might involve the whole family together, such as a vacation to a beach house, or a subset of the family, such as "Auntie's day." Intergenerational rituals may highlight the family's culture, for example, having children witness elders telling the family's origin story reflecting on "where we came from" (see CNSM theory in Chapter 3).

PHOTO 6.1 Holiday dinners usually involve family rituals.

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Some intergenerational rituals involve family subsystems, such as grandparents and grandchildren reinforcing their special connections, for example, a weekly video call, a sleepover, or an annual trout fishing trip that have special meaning for their relationship.

Rituals Involving Family Changes

Family rituals may change over time as family members age, for example, as children outgrow a ritual, or a grandfather can no longer take a fishing trip with a grandchild. Rituals may alter because of structural change, such as a divorce or part of the family moving to another state. When these changes happen, family rituals will need to change as well. Researchers studying stepfamilies found that most of the time they needed to adjust the rituals from their original (old) families when the new stepfamily started. In other words, rarely could they bring in an old family ritual unchanged and

expect the stepfamily members to take part. What worked best was adapting rituals in ways that could be meaningful for members of the old family and the new stepfamily. For example, in one stepfamily, members each chose some favorite Christmas tree ornaments from the old families and then they bought or made a new ornament each year to represent the new stepfamily.[30]

Negative Rituals

Although most family members experience identification and connection through their rituals that encourage relationship maintenance, not all rituals are positive for individual family members, specific relationships, or the family as a whole. **Negative rituals** are also patterned events that produce and reproduce a family's social relations. However, rather than helping to foster positive family identity, negative rituals detract from it.[31] For example, some family members may be excluded from family rituals, as has been the experience for some LGBTQIA+ people when their partners or children are not included in family celebrations. For example, the children of lesbian parents in one family received no birthday gifts from their mother's family. In other situations, family rituals may need to be altered when different family stresses occur, such as illness, job loss, or incarceration. In this case, the ritual may go from being positive for the family to negative.[32] For instance, one extended family took a week-long summer cruise. When the youngest brother lost his job, siblings considered offering to divide the brother's expenses among themselves. They feared this could embarrass their brother and turn a positive ritual negative, so they came up with a reason that allowed them to cancel the cruise this year.

In another study, Leslie Baxter and colleagues studied how children handle the remarriage ritual of a parent following divorce. For most children, the wedding of the parent and stepparent was more negative, what they called an *empty ritual*.[33] Even if the children appreciated that this was a positive development in their father's or mother's life, they often found the wedding sad, or were ambivalent about attending, even when parents

gave them a role in the wedding, bought them new clothing, or took other actions to try and make the wedding special for the children.

In other circumstances, rituals may highlight family conflicts, bullying, or physical or emotional abuse.[34] For one young woman, birthday celebrations in the family brought back bad memories of her parents drinking too much alcohol and fighting. Our point in raising negative rituals here is to encourage family members to pay attention to the potential for rituals to harm the relationship rather than function as relationship maintenance. Adults need to be prepared to intervene when they believe harm is occurring from rituals, especially for those family members unable to stand up for themselves.

To illustrate the impact of negative rituals, let's take a look at the following "Family Matters" to learn more about how negative family rituals can turn into bullying among family members.

BOX 6.3 FAMILY MATTERS: WHEN YOUR BULLY IS YOUR RELATIVE

Researchers Keith Berry of the University of South Florida and Tony Adams, then of Northeastern Illinois University, shared stories of family bullying in this ethnographic study from 2010. Through two narratives, the authors approached the questions of "How does one meaningfully reconcile the anger and bitterness felt toward a relative who has repeatedly harmed them?" and "How does a person carry the weight of the past – the accumulation of harmful experiences – into the present and future relationship with the aggressor?"

The opening personal narrative, written by a female student-author in the first author's class (referred to as Victoria, a pseudonym), provided an account of her bullying sister (Lily). Victoria reported that she had a rather normal early childhood with four other female siblings, but as they grew older, her relationship with Lily changed:

“My sister’s warm connections turned cold” (p. 54). Victoria felt like a punching bag. Lily bullied the other sisters, a pattern that continued through adolescence until Victoria and Lily finally had a conversation about Lily’s destructive behaviors.

The second narrative was written by the author, Tony, about his cousin, Danny. Tony was an only child, and Danny was 10 years older than him. When they were together, “Danny wanted to ‘wrestle’ me.” Tony would scream in pain, but his adult relatives seldom intervened. This “ritual” went on regularly throughout college; when Tony would visit home, Danny would call him a “faggot” or other names. Tony speculates that family members were complicit in the bullying because they perceived Danny might “straighten” Tony; he reflects on how his family, particularly his father, tried to raise him to “be less of a sissy.”

Through this ethnographic investigation of family bullying, Berry and Adams proposed an alternative way to understand family bullying, which involves “identifying, comprehending, and maybe even empathizing with the conditions of people’s actions” (p. 58). They rejected the notion that family relationships are nonvoluntary and argued instead that families should be understood as chosen and voluntary. More importantly, they suggested that some family communication problems are rooted in deliberate, repeated harm, and power-based aggression. By examining an understudied context of bullying in family relationships, Berry and Adams demonstrated that negative rituals in families matter.

For further reading, see Berry, K., & Adams, T. E. (2016). Family bullies. *Journal of Family Communication, 16*(1), 51–63.

Taking various forms, family rituals are important for couples, between generations, and when there are family changes. Rituals often have a positive impact on the family, and they have the ability to be negative as well. Centered in communication, rituals can facilitate or inhibit family relationship maintenance.

BOX 6.4 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What would be an example for each of the three types of rituals in your own family?
2. Although everyday rituals may appear mundane, what is the importance of these rituals in your family?
3. According to researchers studying stepfamily rituals, what needs to happen in order for rituals to function well? How can you apply this knowledge to have successful rituals when you form your own family outside of your family of origin?

MAINTENANCE THROUGH RELATIONAL CURRENCIES

A third way that family members maintain their relationships is through **relational currencies**, which are behaviors that promote family affection and caring. You can think of relational currencies as a vocabulary of loving behaviors, or what some authors refer to as "love languages."[35] Family members share currencies and form agreements about their meanings that either strengthen or weaken relationships. Many relational currencies arise from family of origin patterns as families implicitly and explicitly teach members ways to show caring for others, and to accept the care of others.[36]

Affection is an important relational currency in families, as it is something of value. For instance, one partner may prepare sushi or tacos to please the other, or a grandmother may learn to text because their granddaughter likes to communicate that way. Both of these instances

represent an attempt to communicate affection, and the meaning depends on how family members perceive and value the behavior.

Relational currencies often make an unambiguous and direct statement, for example, the sender's intent may be clear with a hug. Other relational currencies carry a greater range of interpretation. For instance, after a family quarrel, sending flowers may be interpreted in different ways, as an expression of affection or an expression of regret. In addition, relational currencies may gain or lose value. For example, sending flowers every time there is a disagreement will likely lose meaning at some point. Finally, relational currencies must be considered within the contexts of gender, ethnicity, class, and a family's developmental stage.[37] For instance, in a multiethnic family, would it be appropriate for family members to bring food items from Korean or Latinx cultures if this is not their culture?

To follow, we discuss several relational currencies that family members can use as they engage relationship maintenance strategies. We arranged the currencies into three categories: (a) verbal relational currencies, (b) nonverbal relational currencies, and (c) prosocial actions and support.

Verbal Relational Currencies

Verbal Statements

These include oral, written, or electronic messages citing positives such as love, caring, praise, or support, as well as negatives, such as criticism or anger. In some families, people express affection easily, directly, and frequently, for example, saying "I appreciate your sense of style," or "I love you." Other families view such directness as uncomfortable or unacceptable, preferring to save such sentiments for very special situations, if ever.

How do family members, especially new members, learn what is appropriate to say and not? Members might take a new family member aside and clue them into expectations, for example, "My family does not express affection as openly as I have noticed within your family. I suggest

you wait and see what my parents do first." Or new family members may be expected to figure these things out for themselves.

Self-Disclosure

This currency involves voluntarily telling another person(s) information about the self; what we have experienced, feel, or believe. As we discussed in Chapter 3 with communication privacy management theory, families develop privacy rules and boundaries guiding what is or is not appropriate to say. To the extent that the rules are clear, family members use them to consider when, how, and with whom to open and close privacy boundaries.[38] Information is a relational currency in that opening boundaries to another person can be one way to communicate relational closeness or signal the desire to be closer.

Although we often carefully consider what to say and not, people often do not understand the choice to be a confidant and receive private information, especially to consider when it might be wise not to be a receiver. For example, when would a family member decline to hear gossip or certain types of humor? What would be the implications of refusing to be a confidant? As Petronio discussed, when we cannot agree on privacy boundaries, boundary turbulence occurs and has negative implications for the family system or subsets within the family.[39]

Nonverbal Relational Currencies

Nonverbal Affect Displays

These behaviors communicate emotions that may be positive or negative. Positive affect may include one's eyes lighting up, breaking into a smile, or a vocal shift that indicates surprise, delight, or intimacy. As with verbal messages, family members need to learn how to communicate appropriately in a given family system, and nonverbal expressions are very much governed by culture, gender, power, and other aspects of the family. As we

saw with communication accommodation theory in Chapter 3, family members will need to be aware of messages that signal convergence and divergence and how and when to make adjustments, for example, being in a culture where a younger person should not make eye contact with an elder.

Touch

This serves as a relational currency and can communicate physical intimacy. Positive physical contact carries a range of messages about caring, concern, love, comfort, or sexual interest. Touch contributes to one's physical and mental well-being and consequently, touching represents a very powerful currency that conveys feelings that a family member may find difficult to put into words.[40] Touch is an important part of early development for children. Touch is also an important relational currency that can be used and misused, either intentionally or unintentionally, or as a power move. Family members will want to be very observant about how they are using touch in general and what are the responses to touch.

Listening

Active listening is important to communicate involvement with, and attention to, another person. Knowing when and how to engage in active listening is critical to relational maintenance and can help build rapport, which in turn, develops stronger relational bonds and relational satisfaction.[41]

Silence

The use of silence can also be an important aspect of relational maintenance. Like all nonverbal cues, the meaning of silence is varied. Silence may indicate discomfort and can also indicate high levels of comfort and not needing to talk in some circumstances.

Prosocial Actions

Prosocial actions reference positive gestures and friendship gestures that reflect comfort, acceptance, or support and help build these states and feelings as well. They include the following relational currencies.

Gift-Giving

Gift-giving includes tangible symbols of caring or remembering the other(s) when positive.[42] In this category, we include the process of identifying, selecting, and giving of money, gift items, food, and hospitality as meaning and relational currency. Viewing giving as a relational currency may be complicated by issues of cost, appropriateness, and reciprocity. If family members grow up with similar attitudes, values, and practices about gifting, celebrating birthdays or other gift-giving events will be comfortable. When members of families represent divergent financial circumstances, individuals may decide to hold discussions about how to manage gift-giving practices. This might include, for example, giving that is interpreted as giving too little or too much.

Staying in Touch

This includes efforts to maintain important relational ties across physical distance, via technology such as calls, texts, messaging, and video interactions. As with all relational currencies, family members may interpret the use of ways to stay in touch differently, for example, how a college student and parent may interpret expectations and meanings of calling or texting. Family members may use different technologies to keep in touch; for example, adolescents may be more likely to text-message each other and make one another available in “find me” technologies but may limit this form of communication with their parents.[43] As with all relational currencies, family members may need to establish boundary and usage rules that keep those rules current as circumstances change.

Time

Spending time is also a relational currency related to other categories, whether it is visiting, communicating over technologies, accompanying a person on a trip or errand, or time spent on helping or giving, such as shopping, cooking, cleaning, traveling, or driving. Time spent communicates valuing the relationship and/or perceived obligation. Time becomes a currency especially when it is limited, for example, in dual-career households, for busy parents, and/or those whose schedules might be stretched due to intergenerational caregiving.[44] Time also takes on meaning when we think about how fast someone responds to a message or a request, for example.

Relational currencies are invested and benefit a wide variety of family relationships. In this "Family Portrait," Laura Ellingson talks about her own family role as an aunt and how that role has shaped her scholarship, which examines how aunts establish and maintain their extended and chosen family ties.

BOX 6.5 FAMILY PORTRAIT: DR. LAURA L. ELLINGSON, SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY

Dr. Ellingson's website: https://www.scu.edu/cas/communication/faculty-and-staff/laura-ellingson/

What drew you to study family communication?

I came to the communication discipline through my university debate program. I began studying health communication by observing in hospitals and clinics, and many of the patients I spent time with died. I turned to family communication, where my research felt more uplifting.

What are your main areas of family scholarship?

I am drawn to studying extended families and chosen families (sometimes called voluntary or fictive kin). I undertake studies of aunts, nieces, and nephews with my colleague, Dr. Patty Sotirin. Aunts play important roles in supporting families as well as networks of extended family, neighbors, and friends. Aunts often have significant impact on nieces and nephews as “second moms,” role models, mentors, and maintainers of cultural traditions.

How has your own family influenced what you teach and study?

I am the auntie who moved far away, earned a Ph.D., did not have children by choice, and has a spouse who has repeatedly relocated to support my career while pursuing his own career. Thus, I provide a

model of alternative life possibilities for my nieces and nephews, as well as fun opportunities. I remain close friends with two of my own aunties. It felt natural to study this important aspect of my own life.

How can family communication students use your research in their own family life?

My research on aunties showed that there is a great deal of choice and flexibility in how we establish and maintain extended and chosen family ties. Yet those ties require significant effort, for example, planning celebrations, choosing meaningful gifts, sending regular texts, and keeping communication flowing. Traditionally, this work has been the responsibility of mothers, grandmothers, and aunties and still is. However, everyone can nurture ties by trying to communicate with extended and chosen family members.

MEANINGS AND RELATIONAL CURRENCIES

Our list and discussion of relational currencies is by no means exhaustive. Across various cultures, ethnic/racial groups, gender, socioeconomic, and other categories, relational currencies may convey different meanings or values. You may identify unnamed currencies that you exchange or that you have observed in family systems, for example, just hanging out and "doing nothing" can be a loving and powerful message in certain relationships because it conveys trust in what the other person *is* doing.[45] Although a parent might want the laundry folded a certain way, for instance, they may refrain from relaying their preferences to a child who attempted to please by doing the laundry. There are a great variety of relational currencies that family members can use to display affection and maintain close ties.

One other issue we want to raise is about *reciprocity* of verbal, nonverbal, and prosocial actions. It is also meaningful and important to consider not

only being the giver, but also what it means to receive, and perhaps need these different communicative forms, and whether the need for giving and receiving is permanent or temporary. For example, persons with physical disabilities may need assistance in certain circumstances and giving help functions as an exchange relationship. There are certainly rewards to giving and receiving assistance, but there are costs to both givers and receivers that need to be weighed and have implications for relational meanings and maintenance.[46]

How well different relational currencies allow family members to achieve their relational maintenance goals depends on how they interpret and assign meaning to giving and receiving. Over time, in the best of circumstances, family members will create common interpretations regarding meanings. A family's levels of cohesion and adaptability impact its relational currencies and vice versa. Because a family system evolves constantly, the meaning of currencies changes as well, and family members will need to adapt shared meanings and strategies for relational maintenance.

BOX 6.6 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What is a relational currency? How do these help with relationship maintenance?
2. What are three categories of relational currencies that have been most important in helping to maintain relationships in your family? How is each used in your family?
3. Why is the choice of any specific relational currency less important than family members sharing meanings about them?

RELATIONAL MAINTENANCE IN DIFFERENT FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Much of the time, we live in family relationships and we do and say things to try and keep these relationships strong. The ordinary, routine behaviors of life carry us through each day, usually in a patterned and often unreflective way. Nevertheless, we *communicatively maintain* our families through both everyday interactions and/or explicit efforts. According to communication scholar Kathryn Dindia, for us to maintain the quality of our personal relationships (including our family ties), we must maintain the quality of our communication.[47] Although more is involved, talk is the essence of relationship maintenance. Such talk may involve discussing individual needs, negotiating new behaviors, or forgiving one another. Why does everyday relationship maintenance matter? The answer is that efforts toward maintaining relationships help keep members together and more satisfied with their family ties.[48]

To follow, we finish this chapter with brief discussions of relationship maintenance for three types of family relationships: (a) marital and partner relationships, (b) parent and child relationships, and (c) sibling and stepsibling relationships.

Marital/Partnership Maintenance

As we chronicled in Chapter 1, partnering has undergone changes in the previous decades with couples cohabiting more often before marriage, marrying later, and in some cases, becoming less likely to marry. As the U.S. population has become more diverse, there has been an increase in multiethnic and interfaith relationships, as well as same-sex relationships. As we discussed in Chapter 2, relationships that do not fit the "traditional" cultural norm are discourse-dependent and face challenges to their legitimacy, including open prejudice and the need for the family to legitimize and defend the family.[49]

Folk wisdom suggests that over time, romance moves into reality. Although most romantic partnerships experience moments or periods of great intimacy, everyday life finds a way to intrude with its pragmatic demands, such as managing health, financial issues, or career demands. Parents of younger children find that often their time is dominated by their children's needs. Researchers have studied overall relational satisfaction in heterosexual marriage especially, and thus, we know much less about cohabiting couples and other couple variations (e.g., same-sex couples). Relationships researchers Daniel Perlman and Rowland Miller chronicled the degree of satisfaction in marital couples and, perhaps not surprisingly, summarized that "While some couples do live happily ever after, it does appear that many marriages – if not most – are not as happy as people expected them to be."[50]

Questions about relational maintenance for couples are important ones. When studying the first two years of marriage, for example, one research team found that spouses typically start their marriages with extraordinarily high levels of love and satisfaction, yet these feelings tend to level out, and in some cases, dwindle as time passes.[51] Couples develop predictable routines and become more aware of their partner's flaws. Eventually, couples face relational reality, including disenchantment. Partners who maintain strong positive feelings for each other in the early years, however, have a better chance of maintaining this relationship for many years.[52] Communication scholar Jess Alberts and colleagues identified different types of talk (in this case, 13 types) that characterize the everyday conversations of satisfied couples, including self-reports, observations, back-channel comments, talk about another person, TV talk, partner's experiences, miscellaneous comments, household tasks, humor, plans, narratives, positivity, and conflict.[53]

Because relationships inevitably involve stresses and challenges, partners need to communicate openly and regularly in order to cope with difficulties and maintain their connections.[54] *Marital resilience* implies a process in which couples respond to difficulties and purposefully engage in

communication and actions to repair, sustain, and thereby continue relationships in the ways they want them to be.[55] The importance and intensity of relationship maintenance behaviors vary across relationships. Interactions with a marital or romantic partner may involve more intense use of these strategies than interactions with a sister or nephew. On the other hand, assurances tend to endure over time, so the need for constant assurance is not as great as the ongoing need for positivity. In addition, couples weathering challenging transitions, such as illness of a partner, may find that the challenges move the relationship in more positive ways, or erode the relationship,[56] and may benefit from professional intervention. (see Chapter 12).

In addition, researchers cite equity theory by which they explain that couples are most satisfied when they perceive that their relationship is fair in terms of efforts put in and rewards gained, such that the relationship benefits both partners.[57] Scholars also use interdependence theory to analyze the fit or discrepancies between what partners expect from marriage and the reality of what their marriage is. There is a drop in satisfaction to the extent that people's expectations do not match the reality of being in the relationship. For example, if a partner expects that both spouses will both contribute equally to housework, when that is not the case, relational satisfaction will be lower. This might be true even if the other partner takes on most of the yard work or grocery shopping. This makes marital satisfaction and the marriage itself harder to maintain and sustain, especially when people's beliefs and expectations about marriage relationships are unrealistic.[58]

Scholars who study relational maintenance of same-sex partnerships have found similar maintenance behaviors to those used by heterosexual partners, with the most commonly reported maintenance behavior being shared tasks,[59] and gay and lesbian partners reported sharing more time together than heterosexual couples. These couples may be aided by the fact that they seem to be more egalitarian in terms of the division of labor,[60] as well as by the lower incidence of parenthood for same-sex couples.[61]

Although you may think that maintaining satisfying romantic partnerships seem somewhat mysterious at times, in the end, many researchers have highlighted the particular importance of interacting positively via nonverbal displays of affection (e.g., touching, smiling, laughing) and verbal compliments.[62] Making investments in the relationship is key, rather than thinking that finding a partner and living happily ever after will be everyone's path in life. Couples who are more optimistic about the relationship and who expect – and do – invest in the relationship, and work to help it grow over the years, will be more likely to benefit and maintain the relationship.[63] In one longitudinal examination of marital maintenance, for example, scholars found that maintenance behaviors sustained partners' desired relational definitions and that the effective use of such behaviors predicted their future marital satisfaction.[64] The couples in that study also reaffirmed the importance of positivity, assurances, and similar social networks. In a follow-up investigation, the same research team found that partners' use of maintenance behaviors is interdependent: A spouse's perception of satisfaction and commitment is associated with both their own and their partner's use of maintenance behaviors.[65]

Although most researchers assume that individuals engage in maintenance behaviors to support the relationship, this is not always the case. For example, communication scholars James Ragsdale and Frances Brandau-Brown studied individual characteristics, such as self-monitoring and Machiavellianism, that might influence the types of relational maintenance strategies married partners use in their relationship.[66] They raised the possibility that men, who are skilled in modifying their self-presentation, tend to emphasize positivity in an attempt to create an advantageous climate. In addition, other researchers have found that secure individuals use more assurances, romantic affection, and openness than do dismissive individuals who are uncomfortable with closeness and commitment.[67] Researchers also highlight the positive functions of shared activities and play, such as hobbies and travel, on relational maintenance.

They highlight the value of the communication involved in planning activities and the importance of talking about it afterward: It helps partners sustain the positive benefits.[68]

As we mentioned in Chapter 1, partners in long-distance partnerships confront special challenges, such as the military family depicted at the beginning of this chapter. Certain strategies, such as sharing tasks and social networks, may not be highly relevant. If partners' ongoing ties depend almost totally on mediated messages, they may avoid difficult topics, resulting in relational stagnation. Yet when there are at least limited opportunities for face-to-face interactions, partners are more likely than not to experience ongoing relational maintenance needs.[69] Consequently, the pressure to share "good" times together results in the use of more positivity, although avoiding problematic topics eventually leads to distancing and dissatisfaction.

Parent and Child Relational Maintenance

Researchers have considered how parents and children maintain their relationships, especially as children age into adolescence and young adulthood. Although parents of small children enact most of the consciously chosen affection messages, even a toddler learns how to delight a parent with nonverbal affection. At a much later point in life, caretaking may be reversed, as an adult child brings favorite foods and a grandson's drawings to their parent in a nursing home. As parent and child relationships shift from vertical (parent to child) to more horizontal ties, responsibility for relational maintenance becomes shared until later years of life. Whereas caregiving for elderly parents and family members increases time spent and connections, caregiving itself often falls to women and can increase their own mental health and relationship challenges.[70]

Across years and life stages, through conversation and negotiation, most parents and children learn how to stay connected, even as children need more independence and develop personal preferences for expressing connectedness. As we discussed in Chapter 1, children are tending to live

with their parents longer, which increases connection by necessity but can challenge relational quality. Conversely, changes in parents' lives affect their desires or needs for connection. During adolescence, most parents and children express varied needs for autonomy and connection; in later years, when adult children become parents, the autonomy–connection struggles with their own parents may intensify. In some cases, midlife adults may find themselves maintaining critical ties with two or three other generations.[71]

Highly complex family structures require more attention to relationship maintenance; this may involve extended family or step-relatives who assume some or all parental responsibilities for a child. In some families, grandparents assume major parental responsibilities that necessitate a renegotiation of roles and relational maintenance activities.[72]

Sibling Relational Maintenance

Sibling ties represent the longest lifetime relationships for most people, but until recently, little was known about how these ties are maintained through communication. As we see in the case of twins Charlie and Noel at the start of this chapter, siblings may develop ties with each other before creating strong relationships with their peers; at certain life stages, such as middle childhood, they spend more time with each other than with their parents.[73] During adolescence, siblings tend to spend more time with friends, especially if they are not very close in age. In early adulthood, siblings begin to connect or reconnect, forming adult ties.

The long-term nature of the sibling bond depends on the extent to which individuals engage in relational maintenance efforts. In an examination of relational maintenance behaviors in college-age sibling relationships, communication scholar Scott Myers and his colleagues revealed that, although siblings are originally involuntarily linked, most report having a commitment to this relationship beyond obligatory ties.[74] In their study, siblings reported using the maintenance behavior of sharing tasks most frequently and the behavior of openness least frequently. This differs from

other familial ties, such as partners or husbands and wives, as noted in the earlier list. Myers and his team also found that the more siblings liked each other, the more likely they were to use all five maintenance strategies. As some scholars have argued, sibling alliances help maintain relationships because they represent a combination of joint efforts.[75] For instance, in a follow-up study of sibling maintenance behaviors, Myers identified five strategies: (a) sharing tasks, (b) shared social networks, (c) avoidance of negativity, (d) humor, and (e) confirmation or validation of their involvement in each other's lives.[76] Indeed, when siblings are motivated to communicate with each other because they consider it pleasant, enjoyable, supportive, relaxing, and inclusive, they will naturally perceive that sibling interactions are satisfying and promote closeness.[77] As Myers observed, when adult siblings enact relational maintenance strategies, they "provide emotional, moral, and psychological support, fulfil familial responsibilities, engage in shared activities, and remain involved in each other's lives."[78]

Adult siblings frequently confront challenges trying to maintain connections across the miles, especially during the time of life when they are busy with careers and/or raising their own children. Some siblings make greater efforts to pay attention to each other, communicating in ways that create positivity and share support in ways that strengthen their connections.[79] Although face-to-face interactions can be valuable for siblings, many use technologies to maintain contact in adult life, interacting via text or video chat.

Many siblings see their relationships improve in adulthood, yet some siblings drift apart over the years, perhaps never recovering from earlier slights or fights. In some families, sibling relationships may continue over the years, but without close ties. Even when siblings are not close, external factors may contribute to maintaining or building sibling relationships. In fact, when an elderly parent needs more support and care, distant siblings may find ways to work together to help their parent and find themselves growing closer as a result.

BOX 6.7 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What are keys to communicating and maintaining relationships in couple partnerships and marriages?
2. How does parent–child communication to maintain relationships change when children reach adulthood? What has been your own experience?
3. How and why is making intentional efforts toward relationship maintenance important for siblings across the lifespan?

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we explored communication practices that maintain family relationships across the lifespan. Across all relational types, maintaining family relationships is centered in communication, and requires attention and effort. When family members consciously focus on keeping their relationships strong (see also Chapter 5), in the best of circumstances, the different communication strategies serve to strengthen family relationships. One of the most important practical applications you can take from this chapter is that there is no one right way to communicate and maintain relationships. By providing you with an overview of relational maintenance options, our hope is that you now have a better understanding of some meaningful communication behaviors that you can use and intentionally build on to strengthen, repair, and preserve your family relationships.

Key Words

Confirmation
Dialogue
Disconfirmation
Family estrangement
Family rituals
Negative rituals
Recognition
Relational currencies
Relationship maintenance
Respect

FLASHCARDS

occurs when one person communicates in ways
that validate and respect the other person(s)

refers to an interactive, conversational involvement between two or more persons.

which occurs when one person communicates with another person(s) in ways that show a lack of regard

which is acting in ways that demonstrate a lack of family intimacy, ranging from reduced interaction to relationship termination between a subset of the family or the family as a whole

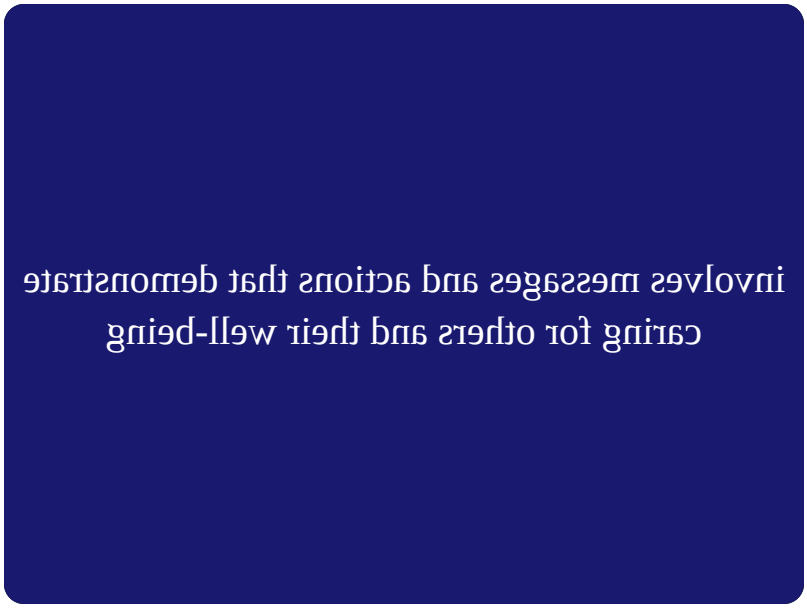
as a recurring communication event that is voluntary, undertaken jointly by family members to honor something important in the relationship.

are also patterned events that produce and reproduce a family's social relations

communicate attention to others' presence or role

which are behaviors that promote family affection and caring

as behaviors people use to sustain relationships



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CHAPTER 7

Intimacy Within Partnerships and Families

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BOX 7.1

Although some relationships are maintained at low to moderate levels of connection for long periods of time, many family relationships reach a deep level of intimacy. Family and partner intimacy is the glue that holds relationships together. What helps families feel deep connections to one another? How is intimacy different in various family relationships? What factors facilitate and prevent feelings of intimacy? In this chapter, we focus on how family members communicate commitment; manage self-disclosure and privacy management; develop personal and relational sexuality; and experience barriers to intimacy. After reading this chapter, you will be able to

1. Identify how communicating commitment helps families create and maintain intimate bonds.
2. Explain how self-disclosure and privacy management foster appropriate levels of intimacy in family relationships.
3. Understand how sexuality is rooted in communication in varying degrees within the family system.
4. Identify barriers to intimacy in family relationships.

SISTERS-IN-LAWS AND BEST FRIENDS

Alicia and Kiley met at San Francisco State University when Alicia was dating Kiley's older brother, Mike. Alicia and Mike both majored in media studies and spent many weekends together with friends from their major, shooting student films. Although Kiley was two years younger and a first-year student, her brother let her tag along when he and Alicia went to parties or shot footage on campus. Over time, Kiley became part of their group of friends. After Alicia and Mike graduated from college, they moved to Phoenix, where Alicia got a job; Mike moved with her because they did not want to be separated. After a year, Mike proposed to Alicia and shortly after, they set the wedding date.

Kiley was in their wedding, and two years later, she also moved to Phoenix to start a graduate degree in social work. Not surprisingly, the three of them now spend lots of time together. Kiley takes care of Alicia's and Mike's first child, Ryan, while the couple works together on local film shoots; when Mike travels for work, Kiley stays at their house to keep Alicia company. Both women enjoy running, so they put Ryan in a stroller and push him while they run together. They also like to cook together, often spending hours making meals to share with friends. During these times together, the women talk about mundane parts of life as well as share their

hopes and dreams for the future, both of which allow them to feel connected to one another.

I WISH WE COULD BE CLOSER

As the only child of a young single mother, Jessica has been the center of her mom's world since she was born. Jessica and her mom have always spent a lot of time together – it was just the two of them for most of Jessica's life. Jessica is beginning to want a little space, however, now that she is in her senior year of high school. She doesn't want to tell her mom everything anymore. She is finalizing plans to go to community college next year while continuing her part-time work as a photography assistant. She wants to move out and get her own place. She is spending more and more time with her friends and has started to date men and women while figuring out her sexuality. She is torn because these parts of her life feel really exciting and important for her as she figures out who she wants to be, but her mom is struggling to give her the space that she needs.

Jessica's mom will say things like, "What am I going to do when you are gone? Maybe you should live at home so you can save money and we can stay close?" These kinds of comments make Jessica want to pull away, and she finds herself telling her mom less and less about her plans and hopes for the next year. She wants to be close with her mom, but not as close as her mom wants them to be. She feels suffocated, especially when her mom says, "I wish we could be closer. It's so hard to let you grow up."

Family connections, sometimes solid and sometimes fragile, depend on members' communicative efforts to create intimacy. Although some relationships are maintained at low to moderate levels of connection for long periods of time, many family relationships reach a level of intimacy that involves sharing interpersonal emotions, including love, warmth, passion, and joy.[1] **Intimacy** is the outcome of an interpersonal,

transactional process that involves two individuals communicating in transparent and responsive ways.[2] The word intimacy comes from the Latin term *intimus*, meaning "inner." Most individuals develop a personal sense of what intimacy means, but multiple definitions exist. The terms "presence" or "being there" for another may be understood as intimacy; it implies physical, emotional, and cognitive connections to another person.[3] Essentially, all definitions of intimacy share one important feature – namely, a feeling of closeness and connectedness that emerges through communication between family members.[4]

Intimacy researchers tend to focus on marriages or adult partnerships but, with the exception of sexual relations, these same characteristics may apply to all family relationships. Think, for example, of sibling relationships. Mike and Kiley in the first example at the beginning of the chapter enjoy a close and connected sibling relationship. Intimacy between siblings differs from intimacy between children and parents or with romantic partners. Mike and Kiley are close in ways that Mike and Alicia are not, and vice versa. Siblings have deep knowledge of and access to one another, but they typically do not provide the same kind of support to one another that other adults in the family do, especially in childhood. Even still, siblings experience intimacy in ways that share common characteristics with other close family relationships. Intimacy within family relationships involves interpersonal devotion along intellectual, emotional, and physical dimensions; it is demonstrated by interaction patterns based on shared knowledge and understanding of others, as well as close, loving relationships appropriately reflective of developmental stages and culture.

In this chapter, we will examine several factors that undergird the development and communication of intimacy. First, we will discuss communication and commitment in family systems. Second, we will highlight self-expression through self-disclosure and privacy management. Third, we will highlight sexuality and communication. Fourth, we will examine different barriers to intimacy, namely jealousy and deception.

COMMUNICATING COMMITMENT

You may have heard people say, “If you have to work at a relationship, there’s something wrong with it. A relationship is either good or it’s not.” These words capture a naïve but common belief about family relationships – that we are committed or not and there is little we can do about it. Although intimacy reflects closeness, **commitment** refers to an ongoing, intentional choice to maintain a relationship. It is the “decisional aspect of love”[5] that affects and reflects intimacy in personal and family relationships.

Commitment connects members of families in varying ways. Parental commitment to a young child represents a one-sided implicit promise. The child’s commitment to maintaining a relationship with the parent becomes important later on as the child ages and invests time and energy into the previously one-sided relationship. Romantic partnerships are a unique type of family relationship because they are voluntary. Partners choose to enter these intimate bonds and can choose to end them. Although marriage is a legal contract, it is optional and can be ended through divorce. Commitment within voluntary relationships plays an important role in determining relational quality and length.

Commitment plays a different role for nonvoluntary relationships, as these relationships are not based on choice. For example, children do not choose their parents, grandparents, and siblings. Even still, nonvoluntary family relationships have an element of commitment that determines the degree to which individuals are invested in the relationship and maintain a state of connectedness to one another. Jessica and her mom from the second opening vignette are negotiating the level of daily interaction that meets both of their needs, staying committed to their family relationship while adjusting their level of closeness in light of Jessica’s life transitions. Without commitment, family members may not experience deep levels of intimacy. Perhaps adult children keep minimum levels of connectedness, visiting on holidays but not sharing much of their life with their parents and

siblings. In extreme cases, family members are estranged from one another.[6] Parents may not be present during some or all of their child's life, and adult children can decide to remove parents or siblings from their life by cutting off communication. Voluntary and nonvoluntary relationships alike depend on commitment to sustain closeness over time, keep individuals invested in their mutual bond, and experience relational intimacy.

Communication is the way that we co-create intimate bonds in family systems, and communication reflects the members' intimacy. **Commitment talk** refers to the verbal and nonverbal communication that supports feelings of secure connection and love. Certain phrases need to be communicated with intensity and then repeated over time to reflect family commitment. For example, we may hear a family member say, "I will stand behind you, even if I don't agree with you." **Codification** is explicit communication that may involve anything from love letters, to written rules for fighting, to negotiating and writing up a marital or family contract. For example, stepfamily researchers often hear stories of parents calling family meetings to create and write up expectations for how members of this newly formed family will interact and treat each other. In many cases, it is not just what we say, but how we say it that counts. As communication scholars Mark Knapp and Anita Vangelisti aptly concluded, "The way we enact our commitment talk is at least as important, if not more so, than the content itself."[7]

Another way we express and celebrate commitment is through ritual, such as an engagement or marriage ceremony. As we discussed in Chapter 5, rituals are recurring communication practices that honor some part of family life. Wedding ceremonies serve as ritual sites of commitment. Marriage rights for queer couples have been in flux over time, as states changed laws to ban or allow same-sex marriage throughout the early 2000s. The decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015 removed state-based bans on same-sex marriage, solidifying marriage rights for queer couples nationwide. Today, an increasing number of same-sex couples are choosing to legally marry, whereas others continue to

participate in non-legal commitment ceremonies. In a study of 20 long-term cohabiting same-sex couples, for example, researchers found that 60% reported forming committed relationships without a ceremony.[8]

Legal marriage involves a significant and unique type of commitment that can support and/or constrain individuals. In marriages, specifically, scholars have differentiated between three types of commitment: (a) **personal commitment**, based on the rewards inherent to the relationship itself; (b) **moral commitment**, based on an obligation to the partner; and (c) **structural commitment**, based on barriers to leaving the relationship and the absence of viable alternatives.[9] All three types of commitment are important and may be highlighted in the family at different times. For example, many partners report that moral commitment and the promises they made to each other are what held the partnership together in difficult times. Staying together because of lack of funds, religious commitments, or family pressures may serve to keep families together, perhaps out of necessity, but these structural commitments do not necessarily reflect intimacy. For example, you may have seen partners who have separated but continue to co-reside to share childcare responsibilities or because they cannot afford to move apart. Personal commitment implies an intense, singular energy directed toward sustaining a relationship. As such, it emphasizes a partnership or sense of togetherness within a dyad or family, which also limits other relationship possibilities. This dual reality represents the key distinction between a commitment based upon an individual's intrinsic desire to be with a partner in the future versus a commitment based upon limitations to the individual's personal choice.[10]

There are many benefits that come from being in a healthy marriage, including health benefits (e.g., someone to take care of you), financial benefits (e.g., greater monetary status), and mental benefits (e.g., another person to talk to about your difficulties and concerns).[11] Even with such benefits, couples may encounter significant challenges over the years that make commitment more important. For example, physical or mental illness can change how individuals experience the benefits of marriage, requiring

couples to lean on their commitment to sustain the relationship. In a discussion of adjusting to his wife's progressive neuromuscular disease, hearing loss, and stroke, one author described how his marriage changed in later life: "When Susan and I talk together with friends, I make sure that she can follow the conversation. When we go out, I make sure she navigates the steps."[12] Family members' confirming verbal and nonverbal behaviors serve to reinforce the family members' affection and commitment after life disruptions and transitions.

Many couples report that the legal commitment of marriage was the glue that kept them together when their relationship seemed to be falling apart. Family therapist Randy Fujishin asked one of his dearest friends, who had been married for more than 55 years, to what she attributed her long marriage. She answered, "The knowledge that some decades are harder than others."[13] Some couples recommit to one another after difficult periods through vow renewal. In one study, communication researchers discovered that couples who participated in vow renewal viewed commitment as a "lifetime promise to stay in the marriage, not a fair-weather declaration to be abandoned when maintaining the relationship became effortful." Other researchers have asserted that "getting married doesn't merely certify a pre-existing love relationship. Marriage actually changes people's goals and behaviors."[14]

Commitment can sustain marriages during difficult times. However, not all marriages are healthy. Marriage is often judged based on a *longevity model*, which assumes that marriages that last a long time are the most functional. Think about how you and others respond when hearing about a couple's 50th wedding anniversary. There is usually a very positive reaction to hearing about marriages that have stood the test of time. Yet the quality of the relationship may be a more important factor to consider than the quantity of time. Even long marriages might be unsatisfying, unhealthy, and have low levels of intimacy. Intimacy and commitment do not always go hand in hand.

At times, commitment can keep individuals in unhealthy relationships. Factors such as legal issues, monetary problems, or strong anti-divorce

beliefs can pressure individuals to stay married, even when the marriage is harmful for one or both spouses. Commitment may provide the resolve that moves partners and family members through very difficult periods, or it may keep individuals in a difficult or dangerous situation with negative implications for one's mental and physical health.

Mature adult commitment cannot be measured by the amount that one gives to or gets out of the relationship at any given time. Commitment is associated with higher relationship satisfaction, stability, and behaviors that maintain and enhance the quality of relationships.[15] Three important communication processes for commitment in intimate and family relationships are (a) effort, (b) sacrifice, and (c) forgiveness. We discuss each of these next.

Effort

Many factors compete for attention in life: workplace demands, homework, school, friendships, family commitments, and community responsibilities take time and effort. Nurturing our marital or family relationships sometimes occurs after everything else has received attention. In most cases, this limited attention spells relational disaster. As one columnist in the *New York Times* observed, "Many severed marriages seem to have just withered and died from a lack of effort to keep the embers of love alive."[16] Unless family relationships receive conscious attention, relationships "go on automatic pilot" and eventually stagnate or fall apart.

Partners who make significant efforts to remain connected to family members become experts on their loved ones' worlds. Researchers have stressed the importance of developing "**love maps**," which reflect a deep knowledge of mundane and intimate aspects about a partner's psychological world.[17] Such "mapmakers" can tell you their partner's worries and joys, dreams and hopes, their best friends, favorite movies, food, the names of their partner's work colleagues, and what pushes their partner's "buttons." This deep and detailed knowledge allows partners to support one another in meaningful ways when life turns painful, as well as to share celebrations

when life brings joy. Such efforts are especially important during stressful life transitions that can take the focus away from couple intimacy, such as becoming parents or adjusting to a chronic disease.

Raising children is obviously effortful, but some parents take a more active role in learning their children's inner worlds, creating love maps with their children. Putting this kind of effort into family relationships means that parents really have to listen to their children and remember the names of their best friends, teachers, and beloved sports heroes, as well as know their career aspirations, hobbies, fears, and dreams. These cognitive maps serve as indicators of parental commitment to their children.

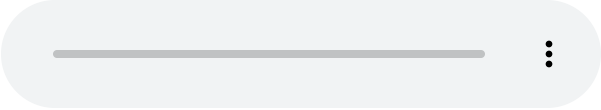
Sacrifice

Sacrifice involves choosing to give up something in order to benefit another person. This involves a high level of commitment and effort. A willingness to sacrifice for family relationships demonstrates strong commitment and contributes to high relational satisfaction and longer relationships.[18] Parents and partners may make large and small sacrifices to keep family members connected and happy, such as canceling a vacation to stay with a sick grandparent or working a second job to fund a daughter's college tuition. Consider the sacrifices that many immigrant parents have paid to raise their children in the United States. A study of Mexican migrant parents found, for instance, that children of unmarried migrant mothers exhibit strong academic motivation because they view their mothers' migration as a sacrifice.[19] Siblings also sacrifice for each other, sharing parental attention and family resources with one another. Many siblings build deep intimacy through sharing their burdens and supporting each other when aging parents can no longer function without support and their children need to serve as caretakers.

Marital vows often include words such as "for better or worse," but many spouses have not had to make significant relational sacrifices for their partners before marriage. Nevertheless, marital research supports the value of sacrifice. A recent study of young married couples with an average age of

27 found that attitudes about sacrifice predicted marital success and relational maintenance in the early years of marriage. As a result, the authors speculated that sacrificing for the relationship may be a significant symbol of commitment to the partner.[20]

Forgiveness



▶ Scripts

What is the relational impact of saying "I forgive you"? Defining forgiveness is difficult because of the various meanings that people have for the process. Communication scholars Vincent Waldron and Douglas Kelley define **forgiveness** broadly as (a) a relational process in which harm is acknowledged by one or both parties, (b) the harmed party extends mercy to the transgressor, (c) one or both experience a transformation of negative emotions to positive emotions, (d) the meaning of the relationship is renegotiated, and (e) reconciliation becomes possible.[21] Importantly, forgiveness implies an explicit renegotiation of the relationship, which involves metacommunication.

Hurt and the need for forgiveness occur regularly in family interactions, given the long-term nature of family ties and the intimate nature of family relationships. Although we talked extensively about relationship maintenance in Chapter 5, things do go wrong in families, and families need to repair relationships.[22] Parent–child forgiveness processes develop over time as the child's ability to understand forgiveness develops. Parents have ample opportunities to forgive their children over the life course. And, of course, children engage in forgiveness with their parents as well. No parent is perfect; parents make mistakes, such as losing their temper or missing important events that cause children to feel hurt.

Dr. Becky Kennedy suggests that repair with children is among the most important processes parents can do with their children.[23] Repair with

children involves revisiting a negative interaction (e.g., the parent yelling at the child), taking responsibility for mistakes, reconnecting with the child, and making a plan to do things differently in the future. Dr. Kennedy offers a script that can help parents with repair:

> Hey, listen. I yelled at you earlier. I'm sure that felt scary … It's never your fault when I yell. Look. I was frustrated, and I'm working on managing my frustration so it doesn't come out in that way. That's not OK.[24]

Although this may seem like a simple process, many parents struggle with repairing.

In his study of close relationships, Kelley found that individuals are motivated to forgive family members because of their love, their desire to restore the relationship, and their care about the well-being of the other.[25] He suggested that the obligatory nature of family relationships creates a sense of stability and resiliency. Naturally, the motivation and ability to discuss forgiveness depend on the severity of the transgressions, be it large (e.g., an affair or physical violence) or small (e.g., an insult or revelation of another's secret). Because marital ties involve high emotional attachment, trust, and interdependence, some transgressions may be devastating, shaking the relationship's foundation.[26] Issues such as incest, physical and mental abuse, or affairs are unforgivable in many relationships.

As you can see, there are different types of commitment in family systems as members communicate in confirming and respectful ways. With this in mind, let's turn our attention to one of the primary behaviors used to enhance intimacy in family relationships: self-disclosure.

BOX 7.2 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. Under what circumstances, if any, should a marital/partnership commitment be broken?
2. How was commitment communicated in your family? Did you see commitment communicated differently within certain relationships in your family?
3. What role, if any, has forgiveness played in your family relationships? Was repair with parents or siblings something that occurred? Were you satisfied with the process of repair and forgiveness?

SELF-DISCLOSURE, PRIVACY MANAGEMENT, AND INTIMACY

Self-disclosure occurs when one person intentionally reveals personal or private information about themself to one or more persons that the others would not discover otherwise. Generally speaking, self-disclosure brings about intimacy. By making it a priority to spend time together and engage in everyday talk, couples and families establish patterns of disclosure critical to building and maintaining relationships. For example, couples holding **debriefing conversations**, or talk about how their day unfolded, are more likely to experience marital satisfaction.[27] Everyday conversations are important in families; they keep other members up to date with your everyday life and set the groundwork for discussing riskier topics if, and when, the need arises. In addition, some circumstances – such as long car rides or walks – encourage family members to share openly. If family members rarely talk openly about their concerns and everyday experiences, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to preserve these relationships when challenging situations arise. If families avoid intimate and difficult conversations, they limit their ability to interact and work together in difficult situations.

Although self-disclosure is important for intimacy in family relationships, disclosing private information to partners and family members involves a series of complex considerations and decisions. Family members must navigate private information, establishing shared and workable rules for managing privacy boundaries. As we interact and negotiate what we will or will not reveal to other family members, we engage in *boundary coordination*.[28] As we highlighted in Chapter 3 when discussing communication privacy management theory, Sandra Petronio explains that *boundary turbulence* typically occurs when messages are not carefully coordinated. For example, when a brother posts a congratulatory message about his sister's pregnancy on social media before she has revealed the news publicly, she may become angry. A mother may break her child's trust unwittingly by discussing her daughter's romantic breakup with her friends, which might indicate that she is not respecting the child's privacy. Unless disclosers explain how private certain information is to them, others may accidentally reveal that information to others.

High mutual self-disclosure occurs within family relationships characterized by a strong relational culture of trust, confirmation, and affection. Self-disclosure permits access to deeper parts of another's life based on mutual sharing. Partners and family members establish and communicate trust by honoring boundary coordination rules, thus maintaining private information in the relationship.[29] Too much or too little information shared in a relationship may occur within some close relationships, resulting in boundary turbulence or high levels of conflict, hurt, and anger. Because trust depends on appropriate openness, in the end, partners and family members need to pay careful attention to when and how they coordinate revealing highly personal information to each other, especially when their disclosures involve intense emotions. Essentially, family members build and preserve trust by communicating and managing information within the family and with those outside the family. Given the importance of appropriately revealing and managing privacy boundaries in family systems, in the next section, we talk about (a) partner relationships, (b) parent– child relationships, and (c) family background in order to

understand how self-disclosure works to establish and maintain family intimacy.

Partner Relationships

Committed romantic partners attempt to negotiate intimacy goals alongside functional goals; in other words, they work at maintaining a healthy and satisfying relationship while managing the practical issues of adult life, including tasks such as managing a home, children, or careers. Committed partners work to successfully create and coordinate privacy boundaries, all of which change over the course of the relationship.[30] Researchers explored spousal disclosure using diary entries for 42 evenings, finding that both self and partner disclosure positively predicted both husbands' and wives' ratings of intimacy on a day-to-day basis.[31] Partners felt more connected when there was a free-flowing exchange in sharing the highs and lows of the day. More important than just disclosure, however, they reported that perceptions of how responsive their partner was to their self-disclosures were an important predictor of feelings of intimacy.

The type of information disclosed in romantic committed relationships is also important, with negative disclosures posing some degree of risk to intimacy. The more frequently a spouse discloses negative feelings, the less likely their partner is to report marital satisfaction. In fact, dissatisfied marital partners often invalidate the feelings disclosed by a spouse about relational difficulties, a move that negatively impacts marital satisfaction.[32] Conversely, partners who feel comfortable sharing their emotions and discussing issues in their marriage are more satisfied.[33]

Serious individual health issues raise disclosure concerns for couples, especially if partners differ on whether, or how, to share this type of information. For example, in cases of infertility, communication scholar Daena Goldsmith stressed the importance of disclosure and couple interdependence to help both partners cope and manage high levels of uncertainty.[34] In such cases, the partners struggle with what to say to each other, and what to share with outsiders such as family members and close

friends. In another study, researchers looked at the different ways that women conceal or reveal their infertility struggles, including providing minimal details or denying the issue.[35] In such circumstances, partners might experience empathic distress; they might be pressured to discuss their feelings, engage in joint problem-solving, and/or buffer or hide their concerns to protect the other partner. Consequently, as research specific to infertility and other lines of work has demonstrated, decisions about disclosure and managing privacy boundaries have a direct impact on partner intimacy.

Parent–Child Relationships

Parent–child disclosure is central to expressing and maintaining intimacy in this primary relationship. Rules of disclosure and maintenance of privacy boundaries do not involve all family members equally.[36] Mothers tend to receive more disclosure from children than fathers, but in some cases, the parent perceived as nurturing and supportive elicits more disclosure. Many college students today are very open with their parents. Factors such as smaller families, a desire to remain interconnected, and constant accessibility to mediated communication have contributed to a greater sense of openness. Unlike earlier generations that experienced reduced interactions when children went away to college or otherwise moved from home, it is not unusual for today's parents and children to remain connected through regular video and audio calls, texts, and social media. Free-flowing disclosure between children and their parents can be a helpful and healthy way to create and maintain intimacy.

PHOTO 7.1 Parent–child self-disclosure paves the way for strong adult relationships.

Tetra Images/Getty

Despite its ability to bring people together, self-disclosure between parents and children can be difficult. In their book *How to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk*, Joanna Faber and Julie King explain that children can feel shut down when sharing things with their parents. Children do not like feeling as though their parent is blaming, ignoring, or trying to control them when they share their thoughts and feelings. Faber and King suggest that parents offer children understanding, attention, and affirmation when possible. For example, a child may tell their parent about difficulties with their elementary school teacher to gain support only to receive criticism. Rather than asking the child to explain the situation or teaching the child a lesson, they recommend that parents nod along and give short cues that they are listening (e.g., “oh” and “um”). These low-control responses prompt children to continue disclosing while processing the situation. Children can make important connections on their own as they

explain the situation, such as recognizing that their excessive talking during class is contributing to their conflict with their teacher. If parents listen actively to their child's disclosures without inserting parental control, the child tends to reveal more about their experiences and gains important insights about the world.

There is a delicate balance to strike when disclosing enough to stay connected without crossing boundaries of privacy and appropriateness. Parents and children struggle to maintain intimacy as children push for increasing independence. Adolescents may perceive that parents are invasive, and they may struggle with autonomy versus connectedness. Returning to the second vignette at the beginning of the chapter, Jessica and her mom are figuring out the best way to share their lives with one another, even as Jessica desires less self-disclosure than her mother. Because adolescents tend to narrow the topics considered legitimate for parents to share, teens will limit the areas they consider legitimate for parents to regulate, which can lead to partial disclosure, distortion, and lying.[37]

At times, disclosure can become a source of stress for families. In her study of mother–daughter pairs, communication researcher Michelle Miller-Day found significant differences in self-disclosure between pairs who were connected and those who were enmeshed, which is considered an unhealthy connection. The connected pairs were comfortable sharing and managing boundaries appropriately, whereas the enmeshed pairs tended to exhibit demands for disclosure and a greater need for individual secrecy in order to maintain a sense of personal identity.[38]

Sometimes, parents engage in inappropriate disclosures with their child, which can disrupt developmentally appropriate roles. For example, newly divorced parents may turn to children as confidants and comforters, which might increase their intimacy. However, when a parent reveals personal information that is inappropriate for their child's age, or the child feels caught in the middle between the parents, children can become stressed. Researchers have found that divorced mothers may share negative feelings about their ex-husbands and financial and personal worries with their daughters, creating distress for the younger women.[39] Clearly, appropriate

disclosures and boundary management remain important to establishing and maintaining intimacy in parent–child relationships. Dr. Jeff Child's experiences and research on family self-disclosure highlights some of the issues relevant to managing privacy and disclosures in parent–child relationships.

BOX 7.3 FAMILY PORTRAIT: DR. JEFFREY T. CHILD, UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS

Dr. Child's website: https://www.unlv.edu/people/jeffrey-child

What drew you to study family communication?

I took my general education speech class with someone who championed the communication discipline. After completing a two-year mission in Brazil, I learned from interacting with different types of families. I soon found my passion studying families, communication, and privacy regulation.

What are your main areas of family scholarship?

I want to understand how young adults make decisions about sharing and protecting who they are in digital and online spaces. With the advent of online technologies, the digital front door was wide open for young adults to create their own norms for practice. Today, family

members often talk about how and when to provide access to who we are and how to appropriately protect ourselves on social media.

How has your own family influenced what you teach and study?

My family has been through transitions such as divorce, single parent-family, and stepfamily arrangements, which have helped me see issues of disclosure and privacy management within the family and through mediated channels. As a gay man, I kept my sexual identity from family members, carefully managing my identities on social media through careful disclosure practices. As my father engaged in death-bed disclosures before he passed away, my expertise in privacy regulation helped me understand and appropriately manage the multiple privacy boundaries in flux.

How can family communication students use your research in their own family life?

I have learned that different family members have unique expertise about privacy regulation. Older generations teach us appropriate things to say within and outside the family. Younger family members often keep up with technology and innovation better than older generations and provide important privacy socialization messages, helping parents and grandparents know how to appropriately share who they are through social media.

Family Background and Intimacy

Family of origin experiences, cultural heritage, and gender set expectations for appropriate management of privacy boundaries.[40] Cultural rules and norms often influence the amount and type of self-disclosure considered appropriate for a given relationship. For example, in many Japanese

families, the degree of intimacy is prescribed by a member's position in the family; members rely heavily on nonverbal communication to share their strong feelings and important messages.[41] Whereas Jewish families often exhibit high verbal skills and a willingness to talk about trouble and feelings, Irish families may find themselves at a loss to describe inner feelings.[42] Gender may also influence revealing and concealing personal information. Traditionally, emotional disclosure is viewed as a more feminine style of relating, whereas a more masculine style of connecting privileges joining together in activities. Accordingly, women may initiate and receive more personal disclosures than do men.[43]

Rules for privacy boundary management also reflect specific features of family structures. For example, developing intimacy with new in-laws or stepfamily members reflects the willingness and ability of family members to navigate how much openness is desired in each relationship. Stepfamily researchers have found this to be quite complicated; stepchildren want stepparents to be open with them but, at the same time, they indicate they would be upset if their stepparent told them what to do.[44] Sometimes, a biological mother may need to step out of the middle of the relationship between her children and their stepfather to let them work out the problems. Over time, this may strengthen their relationship.[45] When a spouse mediates the relationship between a partner and their parents, a conflict may be avoided, but intimacy between the in-laws may remain elusive.[46]

Sibling disclosure becomes increasingly important across the lifespan, primarily because sibling ties represent the longest-lasting relationships that individuals have across the lifespan. Mike and Kiley from the opening vignette share many aspects of life together, even into adulthood. The process of sharing oneself with another tends to emerge in adolescence. Younger adolescents' sibling disclosures occur based on their perceptions of their connection to a brother or sister.[47] Even sibling relationships that were fraught with conflict and competition during childhood may become increasingly intimate as young adults learn to share their significant feelings and protect each other's confidences.

These examples demonstrate that it takes moving through periods of interpersonal struggle to reach a point when members disclose openly and directly. Ideally, everyone learns to manage family boundaries appropriately, but achieving a balance requires thoughtful communication from all members of the system.

BOX 7.4 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. How much self-disclosure was present in your relationship with your family? Did you struggle with feeling like there was too much or too little information shared?
2. Under what circumstances, if any, would you recommend withholding full self-disclosure of a very serious issue in a marital and/or family relationship?
3. Were there specific topics that became difficult to talk about with other members of your family? What caused you to feel hesitant to talk about these issues? How did your lack of self-disclosure help or hurt your feelings of closeness to your family?

SEXUALITY AND COMMUNICATION IN FAMILIES

In addition to commitment and self-disclosure, researchers have also examined sexuality and communication in family relationships. **Sexual communication** occurs when individuals exchange verbal and nonverbal messages in a mutual effort to co-create meaning about sexual beliefs, attitudes, values, and behavior.[48] Sexuality, including sexual attitudes and

behavior, may be viewed as a topic of communication, a form of expression, and a contributing factor to overall relational intimacy and satisfaction. Gender and sexuality are core components of personal identities that influence sexual experiences. Your attitudes about sex, and your own sexual behavior, reflect your biosocial beliefs regarding sexuality that you learned in part in your family of origin. Although sexuality and intimacy are necessarily disconnected in certain relationships, we view sexuality as directly related to partner intimacy and family ties. In the next few sections, we will explore sexuality in terms of (a) partner communication, (b) parent–child communication, and (c) family communication about queerness.

Partner Sexual Communication

As an individual develops a sexual identity, their personal background influences sexual encounters, as does the partner's sexual identity. Researchers have found strong associations between sexual desire and interpersonal intimacy. Couples kept diaries for 56 days on their interpersonal affect (i.e., feelings for the partner) and sexual desire for one another. Partners' lust and positive and negative feelings were associated with their spouse's lust: On days when partners had relatively positive feelings toward the other, they were more likely to experience higher lust themselves, and vice versa.[49]

Sex researcher Emily Nagoski uses scientific research to cultivate a sex positive approach that counters negative cultural messages and misinformation about sex.[50] She notes that there is a wide range of "normal" sexual experiences regarding desires, responses, experiences, and abilities. The dual control model of sexual response explains that humans experience sexual arousal based on two universal neurological and physiological components: the sexual excitation system (SES), which acts as the "accelerator," and the sexual inhibition system (SIS), which functions as the "brakes." Each person has a unique system controlling their gas and brake pedals; some have highly a sensitive SES while others are slower to

accelerate, and some have a highly sensitive SIS that prompt them to experience lower levels of arousal in certain conditions. Couples can feel frustrated if one partner has a highly sensitive accelerator and the other has a sensitive brake. Partners can feel hurt if they want sex more than their partner or view their partner's lack of arousal as a reflection of their feelings about the relationship. However, the dual control model of sexual response provides greater context to feelings (or lack of feelings) of arousal. People with sensitive sexual brakes might experience sexual desire but not want to have sex if they do not feel emotionally connected to their partner or are stressed in other areas of their life. Understanding personal and partner accelerator and brake systems helps to normalize a wider range of sexual desire, which can enrich a couple's sexual relationship. Learning the personal cues that activate the excitation and inhibition systems help couples navigate their sexual relationship without shaming or blaming themselves or their partners.

Sex is an inherently communicative act, yet many individuals struggle to communicate about the act of sex. Open communication becomes critical for both individuals, as a healthy sexual relationship depends on being able to express what is satisfying to each partner. Such direct and honest conversations between partners about their sexual relationship enhance a sense of mutuality. Nonverbal communication, such as touch, gestures, and eye contact, is a significant predictor of sexual satisfaction and holds more weight than verbal communication.[51] However, verbal communication tends to play a larger role after sex. The hormone oxytocin released during sex brings feelings of trust and safety, which can inspire deeper and more intimate verbal disclosures immediately after intercourse. Researchers have found that individuals in committed relationships tend to offer positive disclosures after sex, which further establishes intimacy between partners.[52]

Partners may find it difficult to talk about their sexual relationship, as sex remains a taboo topic for many people. However, talk about sex occurs much more frequently than it once did. Satisfied couples report an ability to directly discuss topics such as feelings about sex, desired frequency of intercourse, who initiates sex, desired foreplay, sexual techniques, or

positions. They avoid “mind reading,” such as, “If she really loved me, she’d know I would like …”. Based on their history of sexual relations in a committed relationship, partners are freer to discuss their desires and understand what is sexually satisfying to each other. Without open conversations, however, partners may remain stuck in frustrating patterns of sexual (in)activity. For example, some partners report a fear of using any affectionate gesture because the other spouse always sees it as an invitation to intercourse; others say their partners never initiate any sexual activity, whereas their partners report being ignored or rebuffed for such attempts. Without addressing these issues, these partners will remain distant and frustrated.

Sexual communication in the early years of a partnered relationship may or may not predict sexual communication decades later. Due to longevity and good health practices, many individuals have the potential to remain sexually active into their seventh decade or longer. Life-cycle researchers reveal that sexuality remains important, yet sexual expectations are altered due to developmental changes and health issues. Older couples interviewed about the history of their sex lives often report dramatic changes in sexual interest, depending on other pressures in their lives. In 10 to 15% of partnerships, women experience an absence of passion and desire for long-term partners.[53] However, changes in sexual interest and practices may not just happen with age. For example, dual-career couples report a decline in time and desire for sex. In addition, losses, such as a miscarriage, affect a couple’s interpersonal and sexual relationships. Concerns about sex, such as premature ejaculation or inability to climax, often change sexual patterns. Partner reactions include performance anxiety, interpersonal alienation, and a dread of talking about sex, requiring couples to discuss the issue using active listening and negotiation.[54] Illness also affects sexual desire or performance and necessitates communication about sex. For example, in the aftermath of prostate cancer treatments or breast cancer surgery, many couples face a temporary reduction of sexual interest, as well as a heightened need for emotional closeness and reassurance of attractiveness.

Both female and male patients may need to adjust to feeling less self-sufficient and sexual, at least in the short term.[55]

At any stage of a couple's relationship, being willing and able to talk about sex fosters intimacy. Some couples may fear that talking about sex seems less spontaneous and less romantic. However, effective communication about sexual needs and desires releases emotions, provides a better sense of the other's needs and feelings, and creates a greater sense of closeness. Thus, for couples desiring an intimate relationship, open and direct communication about sexuality may deepen their intimacy, even during times of struggle.

Couples in ethically non-monogamous (ENM) relationships depend on communication to create mutual boundaries about sex within and outside of their committed relationship. ENM is an increasingly mainstream relationship structure that separates sex from commitment, allowing partners to have sex outside of the relationship without affecting the couple's level of commitment. ENM is an umbrella term that includes numerous arrangements, including polyamory, swinging, stranger sex, and friends with benefits arrangements. Monogamy is co-constructed within every couple, as partners create boundaries on what behaviors constitute cheating. For example, couples vary on if non-sexual flirting or watching pornography would count as infidelity. ENM couples make agreements about monogamy explicit, engaging in conversation with one another to negotiate the range of sexual encounters that are acceptable outside of the relationship. Individuals in this relationship structure express a number of benefits of ENM, such as having diverse needs fulfilled and experiencing personal growth/development.[56] ENM couples report feeling closer to their partners due to the foundation of trust, openness, and commitment that keeps them together regardless of sexual encounters outside of the relationship. Communication plays a vital role in creating and sustaining ENM arrangements. Honesty, listening, boundary coordination, and expressing and regulating emotions are essential for co-creating mutually satisfying and respectful ENM relationships.

Parent–Child Communication About Sexuality

Parent–child discussions of sexuality support a sense of family connectedness and help prepare children for positive intimate relationships in adult life. Conversations about sex occur more frequently than ever due to greater societal openness, media treatment of sexuality, concerns about sexual health, and higher levels of parental willingness to discuss sexuality. Even still, a large majority of parents find talking with adolescents about sex uncomfortable or embarrassing.[57] In a study of sexual communication between mothers and their late adolescent daughters, both described the topic as natural but challenging to discuss, especially in the earlier years of childhood. Mothers reported feeling unsure about when to raise the topic and what to discuss.[58] In the "Family Matters" section, let's take a look at what one researcher found about why parents hesitate to talk to their children about sex.

BOX 7.5 FAMILY MATTERS: PARENTS HESITATE TO TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT SEX – BUT THEY SHOULDN'T

Each year in the United States, a significant number of adolescents experience unplanned pregnancies or sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Although some parents and children have discussed this topic with positive results, many parents do not talk with their children about STIs. In most cases when parents do talk with their children, the conversations are infrequent and often only one conversation occurs. As a communication researcher at the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences in Washington, DC, Katrina Pariera attempted to provide a more comprehensive look at why parents hesitate to discuss sexuality with their children. Using data from the Annenberg Health Communication Survey, Pariera studied a nationally representative,

random sample of 186 American mothers and fathers who reported on 95 sons and 91 daughters. Parents were asked about a list of barriers to holding conversations about sex with their adolescents, to rate their sexual communication self-efficacy, and to respond to prompts regarding the effects of parent–child communication.

According to her results, parents seemed to think there was a particular time for the "One Big Talk," not believing that this particular topic should be discussed within a series of ongoing conversations. Pariera was surprised to find that gender is not a highly significant barrier or prompt of these conversations; rather, the most frequent barrier to talking about sex was parents feeling their children were too young for such a conversation. In discussing her findings, Pariera pointed to a circular problem: parents think their children are too young to talk about sex, but as the child gets older, parents perceive that their children do not want to hear what parents have to say.

Consequently, Pariera argued that there is a narrow window of time between the two barriers to talking to their children about sex. Parents of younger children need to understand why they should talk to their children before it's too late and accept the reality that their children need to start these conversations early. In addition, parents need to realize the extensive, positive effects such talks can bring. She concluded that interventions may be needed to help prepare parents to respond to unexpected questions from their children, and that schools should provide parents with resources on talking about sex before the school teaches a class in sex education. By illuminating the underlying hesitations and challenges to timing that parents experience when discussing sex with their children, Pariera's research demonstrated that family conversations about sexuality matter.

For further reading, see Pariera, K. L. (2016). Barriers and prompts to parent–child sexual communication. *Journal of Family Communication, 16,* 277–283.

Parental talk about sexuality tends to influence children's behavior. For example, researchers have found that teenagers' perceptions of their parents' communication competence and effectiveness are significant predictors of teenagers' sexual health.[59] There are gender differences in parent–child sexual communication. Mothers tend to discuss this topic more frequently than fathers, particularly with their daughters. Girls who talk to their mothers about sexual topics are more likely to have conservative sexual values, less likely to have initiated sex, and less influenced by peer behavior.[60]

Increasingly, fathers play a more significant role in the sexual socialization of their children, especially with daughters, with messages such as "resisting pressure for sex" and "understanding men."[61] A study of father–son sex communication found that permissive values were a predictor of information sharing, but not a predictor of values sharing.[62] The authors speculated that sharing values could lead a son to inquire about his father's sexual experiences, a topic the father might prefer not to discuss. In his comprehensive review of father–child sexual communication research, communication scholar Paul Wright concluded that fathers play a pivotal role in the sexual development of their children.[63] Specifically, Wright found that (a) fathers are more likely to engage in sexual communication with sons than with daughters, (b) sexual communication varies with the amount and quality of overall father–child communication, and (c) if engaging in sexual communication is comfortable for fathers, they are more likely to have such conversations with their children. Furthermore, fathers are more likely to discuss sex when their children are older and in a romantic relationship. Although fathers remain less involved in such discussions, recent research underscores the importance of father–child communication about sex when it does occur.

One scholar asked college student–mother–father triads to recall and report on conversations about sexuality. Most participants (77%) could remember discussions with their parent or child, particularly on topics of morals, pregnancy, and relationships. Although mothers were

predominantly responsible for sexual communication with their children, many children reported that friends were their main source of sexual information, followed by their mothers and then fathers.[64] Many parents find themselves resistant to engage their children in conversations about sex, although most believe such talk(s) should occur. Teenagers report that they are more comfortable discussing sex than their parents are. Some parents have difficulty talking with their adolescents about premarital sex because they question their own knowledge and skill, and they worry that bringing the topic up will encourage sexual activity and that their children will not take them seriously.[65] Due to their insecurities, parents often rate themselves as having much less of an influence on their children's sexual behaviors than their children do.[66]

In a span of 15 years, communication researcher Clay Warren and his colleagues conducted a series of studies that explored the quality and content of parent–child communication about sex and developed the family sex communication quotient, or FSCQ.[67] They measured discussions about sex along the dimensions of comfort, information, and values. These researchers identified four principles of effective parent–child communication about sex:

- Satisfaction with family discussions about sex is dependent on the key factor of mutual dialogue. Children report greater satisfaction with family communication about sex when parents facilitate the conversation and help them feel comfortable raising the topic.
- The ability to communicate supportively about sex necessitates an attitude of openness. Teens want parents to talk *with* them, not *at* them.
- Discussions seem to have the greatest impact when they become part of family discussions well before children reach age 16. Raising the topic early facilitates more frequent discussions and encourages children to view their parents as effective communicators.
- Parent–child communication about sex that is frequent and regarded as effective tends to facilitate children's open discussions with their own dating partners. Children tend to model patterns found in their home.[68]

A healthy family sex communication environment is characterized by respect for gender, boundaries that are developmentally appropriate and support gender identities, effective and flexible communication patterns that support intimacy (including appropriate erotic expression), and a shared system of culturally relevant sexual values and meanings. These families discuss sex "using language that can accurately cover sexual information, reflect feelings and attitudes of members, and facilitate decision making and problem solving regarding sexual issues."[69] Children from families with open conversations about sex are more likely to discuss sexual risk with their parents.[70]

Family members' cultural backgrounds and religious affiliations also influence the nature of discussions about sexuality. Hispanic-Latina women have reported less parent–adolescent sexual risk communication than non-Hispanic peers. Black mothers tend to talk more to their daughters than to their sons about topics of dating, when to have intercourse, and reasons not to have sex until one is older.[71] Asian American college students receive very little information about a range of sexual topics. Sons reported receiving less sexual information than daughters, and fathers seldom addressed the topic. Asian mothers who discussed sexuality tended to address menstruation and dating norms, rather than sexual activities.[72] Sex remains a private topic in China. One researcher found that Chinese parents communicated fairly limited messages related to sex, yet some adolescents were receptive to these restrictive messages because they believed this indicated their parents' love for them.[73]

Religion is another important factor that relates to parent–child communication practices about sex. High control religions often encourage abstinence-only sex education, focusing on rules and consequences for premarital sex rather than discussing risks and safety practices. Purity culture is specific to some Evangelical Christian traditions and supports heterosexual married sex as the only moral form of sex. Messages about purity tend to target girls more than boys, encouraging girls to dress modestly and avoid sexually arousing men and boys. Some families have

children participate in purity pledges, and some girls wear purity rings from their fathers to showcase their commitment to refrain from sex until marriage.[74]

Children raised in purity culture form ideas about sex that can affect them into adulthood. A lack of open communication about sex often leaves individuals from purity culture at a loss about how to navigate biologically appropriate sexual urges. Purity culture is associated with harmful attitudes about sex, including rape myth acceptance and viewing marital and stranger rape as consensual.[75] Children brought up in purity culture experience feelings of isolation and confusion when forming healthy sexual attitudes in adulthood.[76] Many scholars view purity culture as a form of neglect that requires children to engage in significant introspection to address anxiety or displeasure about sex in adulthood.

Family Communication About Queerness

Research on sexual communication is often heteronormative. However, families increasingly have one or more members who are queer. Many parents possess a set of gender-specific ideas about males and females developed from their childhood experiences and from heteronormative behaviors of their children's peers. Children with sexual or gender minorities communicate with parents about their queerness in the context of the parents' attitudes and beliefs about queerness with varying levels of support. Parental reactions to their child's disclosure that they are gay, lesbian, or transgender can be very challenging for the parent–child relationship if parents are not accepting of their child's sexual or gender identity. In many cases, initial parental responses to such disclosures involve sadness, denial, anger, and self-blame, which can hurt both the child and the relationship. Parents of transgender children can experience grief and ambiguous loss when their child discloses their gender identity, but some parents are able to navigate their child's transition by prioritizing support for their child's gender identity over their expectations of gender-based roles.[77]

Parents are increasingly aligning with their queer children as allies, supporting and defending their children amidst anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment. Allyship in parenting a sexual or gender minority child involves communication that expresses love and acceptance, encourages open dialogue, and uses respectful language, such as the pronouns and labels that the child prefers. Queer children are at greater risk for bullying, so parental allies can support their children by working with schools and teachers to make schools and communities safer.

In addition to navigating children's LGBTQIA+ identities, families also face situations in which parents need to discuss their own sexual or gender minority identity with their child. Communication scholars Diana Breshears and Dawn O. Braithwaite described the challenges children face when parents they knew as heterosexual "come out" as lesbian or gay.[78] Although this revelation is often difficult for children at first, they reported coming to terms with their parents' new identities and having very positive relationships with their parents, even when they received other negative cultural messages about queerness. In a different study of gay and lesbian foster parents, researchers found that some case managers had not told the foster children that their new home would have same-sex parents; some of these foster parents chose to discuss this directly with their children if they were old enough to understand.[79] Lesbian mothers must be prepared to explain their family form when their children insist a father is needed to make a baby.[80] Some same-sex partners discuss donor insemination with their children so they are better able to understand where they came from.

We have discussed sexual communication at length in this chapter because this topic is critical to couple and parent–child intimacy and children's abilities to develop healthy and safe sexual practices in their own lives. With this in mind, let's turn our attention to the factors that create barriers to intimacy in family relationships.

BOX 7.6 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. How did your family approach conversations about sex? Were there conversations that you wished you could have had that you were not able to? What were the barriers to talking about sex with your parents and/or other adult caregivers?
2. How, if at all, were gender differences noticeable in how your family talked about sex? To what degree did female caregivers talk more than male ones? How did the messages that female children received differ from messages received by male children?
3. How did your family approach conversations about queerness? How did your family communication affect your views on sexual and gender minorities?

BARRIERS TO INTIMACY

Throughout this chapter, we have reinforced the idea that building marital or familial intimacy involves effort and risk. Many find it more comfortable to maintain several pleasant yet distant relationships, rather than becoming intensely involved with a partner, child, or relative. Some family members establish barriers to deep relationships to protect themselves from potential pain or loss. For instance, children who grew up in abusive or low cohesion families may have difficulty developing close ties to their own spouse or children. In addition to situations stemming from family background, jealousy and deception are two factors that prevent intimacy from developing, and we discuss each in turn next.

Jealousy

In addition to the general stress of life that often competes for each person's attention, some family members experience jealousy. Although some partners view jealousy as a sign of affection, these feelings can turn violent or obsessive, creating a barrier to intimacy. **Jealousy** is an aversive emotion that may involve negative thoughts and feelings of insecurity, anger, sadness, and fear induced by the threat or actual loss of a relationship with another person. Jealousy results from the perception that a treasured relationship is threatened, usually by another person. Constantly mulling over jealous concerns heightens relational tension, resulting in active distancing, expressions of negativity, avoidance/denial, and threats or acts of violence. More times than not, destructive expressions of jealousy weaken relational connections.

Romantic jealousy is most closely associated with marital and partner relationships, although sometimes one parent feels jealous of the other's connection to a child or to another family member. Couples in ENM relationships naturally deal with jealousy as they navigate various sexual partnerships outside the relationship. ENM couples rely on communication to express and address feelings of jealousy in healthy and productive ways. Communication processes such as setting boundaries, expressing insecurities, seeking assurances, and sharing past experiences can help couples regulate feelings of jealousy without allowing jealousy to affect the relationship. ENM couples have a unique ability to experience jealousy without shame or blame, allowing feelings of jealousy to drive closeness and reveal individual and relational needs that may be unmet.

Sibling jealousy reflects birth order, a redistribution of parental resources, or parental favoritism. The naïve theory of affection explains that siblings often view parental attention as a finite resource, prompting them to feel competitive with siblings for parental time, attention, and monetary support. Parent and child reports of parental affection differ. Usually, children feel that they receive less than their sibling while parents perceive that they are treating all children equally.[81] The addition of a baby to the family system is an especially sensitive time for sibling jealousy. Family systems need time to adjust to a new distribution of needs and resources after a baby is

added to the family, with special considerations for older children who feel jealous. Even after the initial transition into the family, a child may believe a parent shows favoritism to a sibling or new family member.[82] Negative consequences of parental favoritism include sibling rivalry, lowered self-esteem, and perceptions of declining family support.[83]

At times, members outside of the family prompt feelings of jealousy. A teenager may reject a sibling's new "best friend" who interferes with family time. Parents can struggle with concerns of losing their child to a romantic partner when a child marries or enters their first serious relationship. Mothers-in-law have reported feeling jealous of their daughter-in-law, which can create tensions for the mother-son relationship, the mother-in-law relationship with the daughter-in-law, and the relationship between the son and his wife.[84]

Deception

Given that trust is a hallmark of intimacy, deceiving another violates relational expectations and undermines the development of genuine intimacy in family relationships. **Deception** involves communicating or withholding information intentionally for the purpose of creating a false belief. Most people expect their family members to tell the truth, and suspicion that one partner is keeping information from the other can lead to dissatisfaction. Sometimes, deception creates accidental privacy dilemmas when an unsuspecting family member discovers problematic information about a close relative.[85] Some deceptions violate the adult relationship covenant, challenging values that are viewed as sacred, such as sexual exclusivity.[86] When an individual in a heterosexual marriage comes out as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, the news usually overwhelms an unsuspecting spouse, often shattering the partner's core identity.[87] At times, deception is an attempt to sustain a desirable fiction, such as when parents do not reveal their use of a sperm donor to achieve parenthood.[88] Such cases threaten the relationship itself if the truth is revealed. Other deceptions, such as persistent secret gambling or illicit drug use, may be

resolved if the offender enters a treatment program. Relatives may opt to remain distant after discovering these transgressions.

CONCLUSION

This chapter explored a range of communication practices that influence intimacy within adult partnerships and families. We addressed the close relationship between intimacy and communication, focusing on specific communication behaviors that encourage intimacy within marital and family systems: (a) commitment, (b) self-disclosure and privacy, (c) sexual communication, and (d) barriers to intimacy. Most humans long for intimacy, but it is a unique relationship in which family members consciously strive for greater sharing of significant personal topics over long periods of time. Such mutual commitment provides rewards known only to those in intimate relationships.

Key Words

Codification
Commitment
Commitment talk
Debriefing conversations
Deception
Forgiveness
Intimacy
Jealousy
Love maps
Moral commitment
Personal commitment
Sacrifice
Self-disclosure

Sexual communication
Structural commitment

FLASHCARDS

is explicit communication that may involve anything from love letters, to written rules for fighting, to negotiating and writing up a marital or family contract.

refers to an ongoing, intentional choice to maintain a relationship.

refers to the verbal and nonverbal communication that supports feelings of secure connection and love

or talk about how their day unfolded, are more likely to experience marital satisfaction

involves communicating or withholding information intentionally for the purpose of creating a false belief

is defined as: (a) a relational process in which harm is acknowledged by one or both parties, (b) the harmed party extends mercy to the transgressor, (c) one or both experience a transformation of negative emotions to positive emotions, (d) the meaning of the relationship is renegotiated, and (e) reconciliation becomes possible.

is the outcome of an interpersonal, transactional process that involves two individuals communicating in transparent and responsive ways

is an aversive emotion that may involve negative thoughts and feelings of insecurity, anger, sadness, and fear induced by the threat or actual loss of a relationship with another person

which reflect a deep knowledge of mundane and intimate aspects about a partner's psychological world.

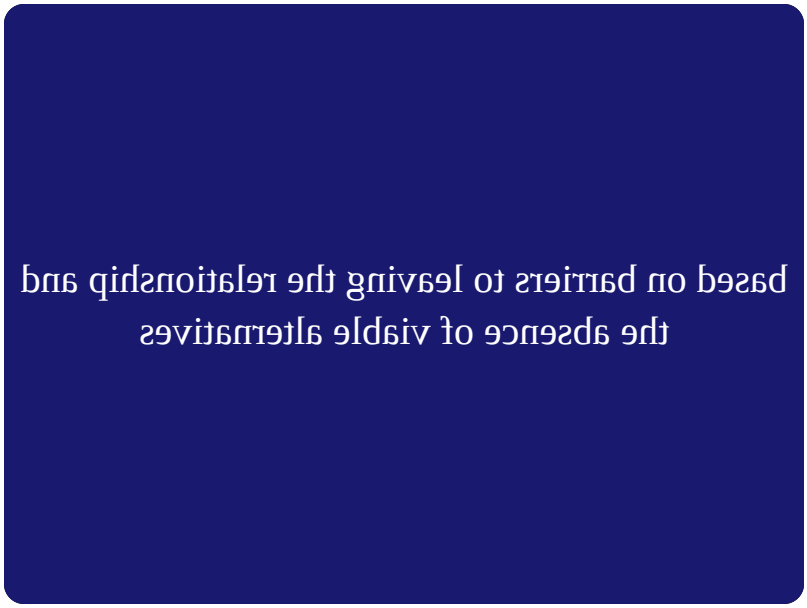
based on an obligation to the partner

based on the rewards inherent to the relationship itself

involves choosing to give up something in order to benefit another person. This involves a high level of commitment and effort

occurs when one person intentionally reveals personal or private information about themself to one or more persons that the others would not discover otherwise

occurs when individuals exchange verbal and nonverbal messages in a mutual effort to co-create meaning about sexual beliefs, attitudes, values, and behavior



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CHAPTER 8

Communication and Family Roles and Types

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BOX 8.1

What are family roles? How are family roles tied to the different ways that individuals communicate to manage family responsibilities? And how do family members learn, adjust, and relinquish family roles over time to create different types of families? In this chapter, we explore how families use communication to enact specific roles and manage family responsibilities. After reading this chapter, you will be able to

1. Identify and briefly describe five essential family functions that family roles help fulfill.
2. Use the McMaster model of family functioning to analyze how members of your family enacted different roles to manage family responsibilities.
3. Explain how family roles are appropriated via role expectations, role enactments, and role negotiations.
4. Give examples of couple and family typologies that family researchers and therapists use to understand how roles develop through family interaction.

COMPETING PRIORITIES

Rebekah is a married mother of two children, ages four and two. Before her first child was born, she had begun a program as a doctoral student in communication at the state university. Both of her parents are professors at a college in a neighboring state and have always been very supportive and proud of their daughter following in their footsteps. Rebekah continued full-time in the program until her second child came along. Following her second child's birth, Rebekah decided she needed to reduce her studies to part-time until the kids got a little older, given her husband's busy work schedule. Rebekah recognized that she really didn't need to have a career to provide for her children

because her husband made enough money to support the family. However, she had such a love of communication and felt a real desire to continue the program. She also wanted to be a role model for her daughter in pursuing her dreams. But even part-time has been difficult with Rebekah still taking on full responsibility for childcare and managing the household, so she decided to discuss her concerns with her husband.

Now Rebekah is considering quitting the program altogether but worries what her family will think of her, especially since she is so close to completion. She feels conflicted about her responsibilities: "When I'm with the kids, I am always thinking about what I should be doing in my studies, and when I'm at school or studying, I always worry that I should be with the kids."

SHE'S NOT MY MOTHER!

Jarvis is 46 and is a solo parent to his 12-year-old son, Jamal. Jamal's mother left when he was just 2 years old, and Jarvis and Jamal have been on their own since then. Jarvis's mother and sister live nearby and have helped as needed, but Jarvis has prided himself for being there for Jamal as much as he can. He has often felt stretched, wondering if he can provide everything Jamal needs. Jarvis is deeply religious, and he and Jamal attend weekly services at their local church. About a year ago, Jarvis began dating Sylvia, a woman he met at a church singles' group. As their relationship has become more serious, he has slowly begun to include Sylvia in activities that were traditionally those that he and Jamal did together by themselves. Jamal initially was hesitant to include Sylvia, but over time, he has adjusted to having Sylvia take on a role in their family. Jarvis has been grateful to have Sylvia around, as he was never good at what he calls the "touchy, feely stuff." He thinks that Sylvia has a nice way of providing the emotional support for Jamal that he doesn't provide very well. She has also encouraged Jamal to pursue his interest in music, often driving him to piano lessons – something that Jarvis was never able to do due to his busy work schedule.

More recently, Jarvis and Sylvia have been discussing marriage, and Jarvis intends to propose fairly soon. When he explained this to Jamal, he framed the news as "something wonderful" – finally, Jamal was going to have a mother. Jarvis was surprised at Jamal's intensely negative response: "She's not my mother! And she never will be my mother!"

One of our goals in this book is to help you understand how communication creates and changes family systems in diverse ways. Although you may not be balancing the work demands of a doctoral program with family responsibilities like Rebekah, or figuring out how to introduce a potential new member to the family when one of your loved ones feels less welcoming, like Jarvis, you likely have seen and experienced moments in your own family when your roles and responsibilities have changed. How did you talk about those changes with other family members? What kinds of expectations did you and your family members have for your new role and responsibilities? And how were those expectations communicated and acted upon?

There is tremendous variability in communication across families as members interact with each other to create, sustain, and alter their role relationships. For instance, think about the different and complex ways that people use language to talk about family roles, including words such as *co-breadwinners, stay-at-home parent, noncustodial father,* or *third mother-in-law*, all of which have

implications for family interaction. Today, opinions differ widely about what it means to enact the roles of partner, mother, stepbrother, ex-sister-in-law, or foster daughter, to name a few. Within families, roles are established, grown into, grown through, discussed, negotiated, redefined, and accepted or rejected. As members mature and families adapt to changing circumstances, new roles may emerge, existing roles may change, or former roles may disappear. In order to understand role development, we need to consider role definitions, expectations, and performance. In this chapter, we will explore these complex role issues and their implications for family communication. First, we will define family roles and discuss how communication scholars view family roles through an interactional lens. Second, we will identify five essential family functions that serve as a basis for family roles before discussing how family roles are learned, adjusted, and relinquished through communication. Third, we will examine how communication functions in different types of couples and families.

To begin, we define **family roles** as recurring patterns of behavior developed through the social interactions that family members enact in order to fulfill family functions. From a communication perspective, roles develop as family members interact and create shared meanings and negotiate what behaviors to perform in order to sustain the family system. Thinking back to our opening scenario with Jarvis, for example, what might Sylvia's willingness to take Jamal to his piano lessons mean to Jarvis? What might it mean to Sylvia? How might her encouragement of Jamal communicate her desire to be included in the family? This perspective contrasts with theories that present a fixed, or unchanging, view of roles based solely on biological, legal, or structural terms. Rather than take a fixed view, as communication scholars, we have adopted an interactional perspective, one that emphasizes how family roles and the behaviors used to enact them emerge through social interaction.

According to this perspective, roles emerge through family members' dialogue with each other, reflecting the transactional nature of communication. In essence, family roles are developed, maintained, and changed through communication. You likely learned how to assume your place within your family from the feedback provided by your other family members. When we were children, many of us received direct instructions about how to enact the roles of son or daughter in our respective families, or we may have modeled our behaviors from interactions we observed in others, or both. As adults, we tend to use our family of origin history as a base from which to negotiate mutual roles, such as partner or parent, whereas as children, we likely developed our roles through a combination of adult direction, family experiences, peer relationships, and societal and cultural norms.

Today, family roles are tied less to age because of increased longevity and more fluid life stages.[1] A 48-year-old female may parent a preschooler; a 21-year-old male may do the same. Family roles are also reciprocal in nature. For instance, you cannot be a stepfather without a stepchild, a husband without a spouse, or a sister without a sibling. Over time, family members negotiate their mutual expectations of one another, create predictable interaction patterns, and acquire or share role identifications such as provider or nurturer at different life stages. As circumstances change, or some hopes or expectations fade, members may relinquish certain roles.

Consequently, an interactional approach to role development reflects (a) the identity and cultural background and role models of a person who occupies a social position, such as oldest son or stepmother; (b) the relationships in which a person interacts; (c) the changes each family member experiences as they move through the life cycle or encounter life crises; (d) the effects of each member's role performance on the family system; and (e) the extent to which a person's

social/psychological identity is defined and enhanced by a particular role. For example, a woman's behavior in the role of spouse may have been very different in her first marriage than in her second, due to her own personal growth and the role enactment of each partner. Despite changes in her role as a spouse, however, her behaviors are likely to fulfill certain family functions that are needed to sustain the family system. With this idea in mind, let's turn our attention to specific role functions and responsibilities that are likely to exist in all families.

SPECIFIC ROLE FUNCTIONS AND FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

To help us understand how family members communicate to accomplish a variety of tasks, scholars have developed the *McMaster model of family functioning*, a model that focuses on discovering how a family allocates and manages family responsibilities.[2] Specifically, this model describes five essential family functions that serve as a basis for family roles:

- Providing for gender socialization and sexual needs.
- Providing nurturing and emotional support.
- Providing for individual development.
- Providing for kinship maintenance and family management.
- Providing basic resources.

These family functions can be categorized as instrumental (providing resources for the family), affective (providing support and nurturing care, fulfilling adult sexual needs), and mixed (providing life-skill development and system upkeep). When you look at Figure 8.1, imagine a mobile with the system's parts balanced by the multiple role functions operating within the family. These role functions become super-imposed on the family system and its members.

Although most researchers to date who study family functions tend to presume two-parent households involving a male and female parent, same-sex partners with children face many similar issues as they confront daily family life,[3] as do single parents, members of multigenerational households, and stepfamilies. With this in mind, let's examine each of the five functions more closely before discussing how family members adopt and enact particular roles to fulfill each function.

Providing for Gender Socialization and Sexual Needs

In a culture that provides multiple possibilities regarding gender roles, cisgender men and women frequently receive mixed messages about what it means to be masculine and feminine and a blurring of boundaries based on male and female binaries.[4] The term **cisgender** refers to a person whose gender identity corresponds with that person's sex assigned at birth. When we think about the experiences of male and female roles in families, cisgender men may hear that a woman wants a man who is expressive, gentle, nurturing, and vulnerable, yet also successful, assertive, prosperous, and capable. Cisgender women may receive similarly conflicting messages about what men want and about how to be independent yet connected in relationships. Despite these conflicting messages, gender roles reflect a co-mingling of social, cultural, and economic forces that affect family life.

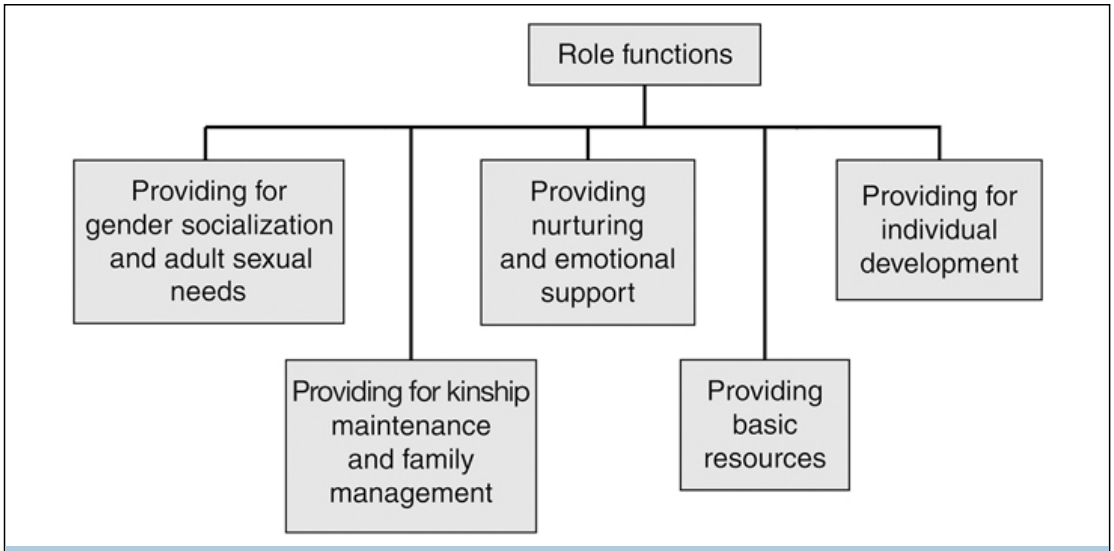

Role functions
Providing for gender socialization and adult sexual needs
Providing nurturing and emotional support
Providing for individual development
Providing for kinship maintenance and family management
Providing basic resources

FIGURE 8.1 Family role functions.

The process of learning what it means to be male or female begins at birth. Think about all of the indirect and direct messages you received in this regard. Even as newborns, for example, males and females are handled differently as most babies receive "gender-appropriate" toys. By the time children reach kindergarten, researchers have found that most boys enact the masculine behaviors expected of them and restrict their interests and activities to avoid what might be perceived as feminine. Similarly, most girls encounter feminine expectations. Family members teach children, both explicitly and implicitly, what is "masculine" and what is "feminine" from their comments about play, exercise, weight, appearance, and dress.[5]

Whereas some religious and cultural traditions support strong distinctions between masculine and feminine behaviors, others find such gender-bound distinctions to be repressive with little correspondence to the lived experience of some family members today. For example, researchers have interrogated **cisnormativity**, or the beliefs, practices, and communication patterns that privilege cisgender people at the expense of transgender and gender variant others, by exploring how cisgender women use communication to cisgender family. These researchers found that the cisgender women in their study *claimed exemptions* by talking about transgender family members as something they did not need to consider and would not need to concern themselves with. The women also *emphasized difficulty* by talking about the challenges and difficulties they would experience if they had a transgender parent or child. Both practices reveal ways in which cisgender people base their definitions of what it means to be a family on cisgender norms.[6]

Although religious and cultural traditions influence how individuals learn their gender orientations, in families, gender socialization often involves same-sex guidance from a parental figure. When responding to questions about what it means to be a good son, for example, researchers have demonstrated that males consistently reference their fathers but not their mothers, suggesting that sons learn their own roles, specifically, and the role of fatherhood more generally, from male parents.[7] Moreover, the gender-based communication directives and modeling you encountered during childhood tend to reappear when you become a parent unless you deliberately choose not to follow such expectations. For example, cisgender men's roles are becoming more flexible as adult partners renegotiate family roles and responsibilities, and as fathers become increasingly involved in

raising their children.[8] Nevertheless, the tension of embracing role flexibility in the face of cultural expectations of masculinity remains, as many married fathers who lose their jobs fight to retain their roles as "real men" in circumstances they view as emasculating. As communication scholars have demonstrated, these cisgender men will often cognitively reframe their situation in order to find ways to maintain a self-concept of "breadwinner" in their families.[9]

PHOTO 8.1 Role development involves observing and imitating role models.

Asia Images Group/Shutterstock

Further challenging gender-stereotyped roles in families are the ongoing efforts of communication scholars to document how disclosure, intimacy, and role behaviors differ between cisgender men and women. For example, Julia T. Wood and her colleagues have questioned the cultural privileging of openness and self-disclosure as the only paths to developing intimacy in family relationships.[10] They argued that, because cisgender men's self-disclosure does not reduce stress as much as it does for cisgender women, some cisgender men regard practical help, mutual assistance, and companionship as better benchmarks of caring and closeness. More recently, Wood suggested that cisgender women tend to develop and maintain closeness through personal self-disclosure, whereas cisgender men often develop and maintain closeness through shared activities.[11] Traditionally, these differences in communication and in family role behaviors were observed in families headed by a straight couple. Mothers shared more time with daughters in meal preparation and family care projects; fathers shared more time with sons in doing home and car repairs and yard work. Today, partners enact gender roles that work for their particular relationships. Due to the relative absence of marital role models, for example, LGBTQIA+ couples must negotiate responsibilities rather than rely on societal expectations or previous gender role models. In LGBTQIA+ couples, the division of household tasks tends to be

more equitable than in straight couples, with decisions about household labor made based upon the particular skills of each partner, their preferred interests, and perceived needs.[12]

Ultimately, there are many factors that influence how families enact gender roles, including cultural backgrounds, career demands, and individual expectations. With time, partners may develop more flexible roles through their ongoing experiences and interactions with each other as they communicate in response to the internal and external demands of family life. Looking back at our opening scenarios, how might Rebekah discuss her concerns about finishing her degree while balancing her responsibilities at home with her husband? How might she and her husband renegotiate their roles so that she can have the necessary freedom and flexibility to complete her education? And how might Sylvia's enactment of motherly roles and responsibilities further strengthen her relationship with Jarvis, despite Jamal questioning her legitimacy as his "mother"?

Despite the many changes in family life that have occurred over the last two decades, we should carefully note that not everything changes so quickly in terms of **gender role expectations**, which refer to the behaviors that family members anticipate masculine and feminine individuals will enact to fulfill family responsibilities. For example, cisgender women are more likely than cisgender men to receive advice from parents that they should stop work after having children and that they should make career choices that will accommodate family.[13] Husbands who express desires to stay at home with children receive negative reactions as do wives and mothers who might need or want to take on a commuter role and be away from family for all or part of the week.[14] Likewise, cultural and legal changes regarding marriage equality in the United States and increasing public discussion of transgender individuals raise issues for family identity and role expectations.[15] Although family members may negotiate how to enact roles and fulfill responsibilities in a manner that works best for them, they do so within a larger social and societal network that has gender expectations of its own.

Providing Nurturing and Emotional Support

The second family function that the McMaster model describes involves nurturing children and providing emotional support in times of stress and crisis. For many of us, family members provide a sense of mutual admiration, support, and reassurance that helps us cope with difficult circumstances. From a transactional perspective, your family's relational satisfaction is likely to increase when each member meets the needs and expectations of other family members. More importantly, children who are nurtured and supported by their parents, social networks, and community develop the capability to be nurturing and supportive themselves. With this in mind, let's briefly examine what it means to nurture children before discussing how families fulfill a responsibility to provide emotional support in times of need.

Nurturing Children

Parents nurture their children when they communicate care and teach their children family beliefs, values, and expectations. Through advice, directives, answers to questions, and observations of other people's behaviors, children learn what parents and society expect of them. Until recently, mothers served as primary nurturers because they had far greater contact with their children than did fathers. This is still true in some families, but not to the same extent as in the past. For example, when looking at how fathers of preschool children communicatively construct their child-rearing behaviors,

one study revealed a “masculine” concept of caregiving that reflected the increasing role of fathers as caretakers.[16] Historically, children typically perceived their fathers to be more distant, less empathetic, and less caring than their mothers, especially when it comes to verbal and nonverbal expressions of love; yet today, fathers spend more time with their children and have greater involvement than fathers did in the past.[17]

Despite some of the changes that have occurred in fathering over the last two decades, some differences in how mothers and fathers nurture their children continue to exist, especially in certain contexts. For instance, mothers are typically the primary caregivers of children who have special needs. Likewise, fathers of children with mood disorders have more difficulty accepting the illness and have been less likely to participate in therapy efforts.[18] In a comparison of parental stress when parenting school-aged children with disabilities, both mothers and fathers experienced similar levels of stress, although fathers reported more difficulty establishing an emotionally close relationship with the child.[19]

In addition to parents, adolescent and young adult siblings may also help nurture their younger siblings during middle childhood (ages 5 to 11), especially when they spend more time with their siblings than with their parents.[20] Consequently, many older siblings become important role models for younger siblings. At the same time, children’s behavior can influence how parents (and at times, older siblings) enact their roles. When children resist the socialization messages of their parents, such resistance can frustrate parents and heighten family stress, especially when it occurs in a rigid family system.

Providing Support and Empathy

Alongside nurturing children is the task of providing support and empathy to family members in times of need. In other words, an important responsibility of family members involves focusing on each other’s needs, listening to each other’s problems, and providing emotional support.[21] An important skill in the provision of emotional support is empathic listening, as such listening provides the other with a sense of being understood and the opportunity to share pent-up feelings of rage, frustration, or exhaustion. If the communication channels between family members encourage and permit the open expression of feelings, other family members can function therapeutically by listening empathically, offering advice, or questioning others to help them understand their own motives. These types of behavior, in turn, are likely to benefit children as they age into adolescence and young adulthood and develop their own friendships and romantic relationships as adults. For instance, researchers have demonstrated that teens who report high levels of empathy from their parents report using more positive, prosocial behaviors themselves, such as communicating empathy, showing concern for others, and assisting others in times of need.[22]

Providing for Individual Development

The third role function described in the McMaster model includes those tasks that each individual must fulfill in order to become self-sufficient. Over time, individuals must simultaneously develop their own uniqueness apart from others while maintaining a sense of commonality with others,[23] and they first begin to work this out in their interactions with family members. When young family members cannot accomplish the task of developing self-sufficiency, they can easily become overly

dependent on the family system. A “take care of me” attitude on the part of any one family member diminishes the ability of the family system to accomplish this task.

Family members must interact in ways that facilitate each other’s opportunities for self-discovery and talent development. For example, researchers have demonstrated that children who perceive that their parents are competent communicators and that their family is conversation oriented are more likely to view themselves as competent communicators.[24] Parents perform the function of helping their children develop self-sufficiency during their children’s formative years, but from an early age, siblings also influence one another’s talents. Through their play with one another, siblings develop the communication strategies they need to assume future family roles. In essence, younger family members need messages that support or encourage individual decision-making, as the recognition of members’ ideas, arguments, and decisions creates a context for valuing independence.

Providing for Kinship Maintenance and Family Management

The fourth set of responsibilities described in the McMaster model involves maintaining relational ties and managing the daily lives and needs of all members. Let’s examine each one separately before we turn our attention to the final task described in the model: providing basic resources.

Kinship Maintenance

One complex and often overlooked maintenance function involves managing and nurturing kinship ties within the extended family network. **Kinship maintenance** involves sharing in, participating in, and promoting the family’s welfare through managing contacts with biological, legal, and chosen kin who live outside the family home. These interactions to maintain families may be through living in the same household, visiting, or other face-to-face communication, or by mediated communication – for example, by phone, social media, text messaging, or in written form.

As we discussed in Chapter 5 when considering how different types of communication networks influence family identity, kinkeeping involves keeping in touch with other family members and, in some cases, keeping members in touch with each other.[25] Kinkeepers work to maintain family communication by providing information and assistance, facilitating rituals, and continuing a previous kinkeeper’s work of maintaining family relationships.[26] Researchers have found that women are more likely to play this role in families. For instance, aunts take on kinkeeping functions as they work to preserve and strengthen family bonds through activities such as facilitating rituals and maintaining communication, particularly long distance.[27]

The kinship maintenance function directly involves and affects family communication because “kin-work” is the labor that enables families to endure over time.[28] Whether one is included or excluded from family events or hears the latest family news signifies one’s place within the family system. As we discussed in Chapter 6 when examining how relational maintenance enhances family cohesion, family rituals, such as birthday or holiday celebrations, represent a special time for kin-related communication and family maintenance.[29] In highly cohesive families, for example, attendance at get-togethers is mandatory and only illness or great distances are acceptable excuses. In other households, holidays may evoke feelings of sadness or conflict because estranged or divorced members are excluded. Members of families low in cohesion may envy the family celebrations of

highly cohesive families. Stepfamilies must work to create their own rituals to provide members with a sense of identity even as some members may resist these attempts.[30]

Kinship ties are also affected by external factors, especially in "non-traditional" family forms. For instance, single-parent family systems encounter special kinship opportunities and concerns, as single fathers are more likely than married fathers to share breakfast, home activities, and outings with their children. Likewise, in divorced families, there may be special challenges in communication with the ex-spouse and their new family. In stepfamilies, the ability to maintain relationships will be affected by the attitudes of step-grandparents and an ability to retain ties with biological paternal grandparents.[31] On occasion, children lose active contact with an entire side of their family heritage.

Family kinship networking also varies according to family of origin and ethnicity. For example, Mexican men and women tend to have equally strong relationships with their relatives. However, Mexican men network more with other persons outside their families, whereas Mexican women typically form their strongest relationship ties within their families.[32] In Chicano cultures, godparents (*padrinos*) link families and communities through friends or authorities. Although often not relatives, godparents and other honorary family members (e.g., an honorary aunt or uncle) play key roles in religious activities, such as first communion, confirmation, and marriage. They also provide nurturing and financial aid when needed, as a moral obligation.[33]

Management of Daily Needs

In addition to kinship maintenance, families also help meet the daily needs of each family member, including decision-making to facilitate housekeeping, childcare, recreation, and the management of family finances. As you might suspect, how partners negotiate the division of household chores can become a frequent source of conflict. In the case of straight married couples, for example, both husbands and wives tend to see the division of household chores as less fair to wives who tend to perform a greater amount of housework, regardless of the presence of children or the woman's employment status.[34] In marriages where wives and husbands are both employed full-time, however, the gap between the amount of housework wives and husbands perform is smaller than when wives work part-time or not at all.[35]

Ongoing changes in home maintenance reflect active negotiation between partners since most are creating a housekeeping system different from that in their families of origin. In fact, a frequent and important negotiation task of cohabiting or married partners involves coordinating duties and responsibilities with each other, with 40% of couples reporting that they negotiate these details daily and 26% indicating that such negotiations occur two to three times a week.[36] In commuter marriages, where spouses do not share a residence all of the time, this negotiation process can become even more complicated. For example, communication scholar Karla Bergen and her colleagues found that, although commuting wives were resisting cultural expectations by pursuing their own careers, they experienced traditional gendered expectations from their husbands for housework and other family roles, as wives reported needing to remind or nag their husbands to complete tasks at home.[37]

Finally, family members not only negotiate the daily care of the family and the completion of household chores and activities, but they also engage in recreation management, which involves coordinating those things that family members do for relaxation, entertainment, or personal development. Whereas athletic activities increasingly involve a variety of genders, other activities

may appeal to different ages or genders. Extremely cohesive families encourage much group recreational activity, whereas less cohesive families do not. Importantly, parents not only model to their children what is appropriate recreational behavior, but at times, they can create unnecessary tension and conflict if their children fail to meet their expectations in recreational activities.

Providing Basic Resources

The final responsibility discussed in the McMaster model of family functioning involves providing basic resources to family members. When studying how family members provide basic resources, some scholars distinguish between dual-career couples and dual-earner couples. A **dual-career couple** refers to a partnership in which each person pursues a full-time career and expects to advance up the career ladder. In a **dual-earner couple**, both partners are employed, but one or both of the partners work in careers that do not offer a career ladder or the promise of professional advancement.[38] Some couples represent a blend of these types, as traditionally, some women would earn extra income for their family rather than pursue careers. Obviously, this has changed quite a bit in contemporary families as the number of dual-career couples has increased.

Not surprisingly, the current economic climate and a growing cultural acceptance of both parents acting as caregivers and earners have led to stressful lifestyles. Negotiating these roles is complicated and often unsatisfactory.[39] In most families today, neither parent stays at home all day, so there are challenges to finding time to prepare dinner, be home when the children arrive home from school, or deal with other practical aspects of daily family life, such as accepting a package or getting the refrigerator repaired. Families face the challenge of trying to oversee their latchkey children from afar and worry about what their teenagers are doing after school. As a result, parents have become increasingly reliant on technology, as children check in via their cell phones and as some parents use video cameras to make sure that their children are home and safe. Although technology can be a helpful tool, during the COVID-19 pandemic when parents and children were forced to work and do school from home, parents' use of digital technologies created moments of technology interference in their interactions with their children that had a negative effect on their children's social competence. However, parents who were more emotionally stable did a better job of regulating the interruptions caused by digital technology use and thus, were able to soften the negative effects of technology interference on their children's social competence.[40]

Merging the roles of provider/worker and family member creates **spillover**, a process that occurs when responsibilities from one domain of life (e.g., work) carry over into another domain of life (e.g., family). Spillover is bidirectional; family demands can spill over into work life and work demands can spill over into family life. A parent of two elementary school-aged children may experience spillover of family responsibilities into work. For example, if one child is sick and needs to be kept home from school, a parent must stay home from work to care for the child, perhaps videoconferencing in to an important meeting. The same parent also experiences their work demands spilling over into their family life when they get online to complete some work while their children watch a movie. These challenges increase for single parents who do not have a partner to help cover these different responsibilities.

Work–family conflict and spillover may be even more of a challenge for low-income, unmarried parents, especially for single mothers. Of these women, those who report high levels of work–family conflict are less likely to be employed. In fact, work–family conflict may keep these women

unemployed, or if they find jobs, make it difficult for them to maintain employment stability or advance in their careers.[41]

One of the more important conclusions to emerge from research on spillover is the tension and stress it can create. For example, some scholars have found that men experience stress as they struggle to balance competing demands across professional, marital, and parental roles.[42] Likewise, the same roles and stresses exist in women's lives, as illustrated by the competing demands that Rebekah experienced in the case study at the beginning of this chapter.[43] Although both men and women are equally likely to experience tension and stress from competing work and family demands, how the tension is experienced is likely to change over the course of the family life cycle.

Effective communication is critical to managing multiple role identities. When we adopt an interactional perspective to family roles, we see that couples interact and create shared meanings for their roles as providers and caregivers through their communicative practices.[44] Typically, most couples are sitting down at their kitchen tables to coordinate their family's schedules, duties, and responsibilities (e.g., childcare and elder care) at least two to three times a week.[45] Family members then attempt to manage family-to-work stress through specific workplace strategies. For instance, researchers have identified a variety of communication strategies that mothers use to manage family spillover into the workplace, including venting with superiors and/or with coworkers, receiving affirmation and assurances from coworkers, seeking advice from coworkers, and seeking instrumental (practical) support from supervisors, among others.[46]

In addition to communication strategies and behaviors, family form may also influence members' abilities to manage work–family stress. In single-parent families, for example, providing economic stability is a primary task associated with the parenting role, as single mothers report struggling with decreased economic resources, longer work hours, and more limited social support.[47] Although many divorced fathers view providing economic support for their children as a significant and continuing role,[48] in stepfamilies, some stepparents believe that they have lost control of financial or time resources that go toward their stepchildren. Clearly, the provision of basic resources involves an ongoing process of role negotiation and strain as family members navigate both the internal expectations of other family members and the external circumstances that alter the social and economic climate of the family.

BOX 8.2 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. How did your parents carry out the role functions involved in providing resources and nurturance for the family? To what extent were their role behaviors gender-stereotypical? To what extent were they gender atypical?
2. Among the different members of your family, who typically provided emotional support in times of crisis and stress? How did they communicate to provide a sense of mutual admiration, support, and reassurance?

3. Who are the kinkeepers in your family? How do they enact "kin-work" to help family members maintain their relationships with one another?

HOW FAMILY MEMBERS LEARN, ADJUST, AND RELINQUISH FAMILY ROLES

Now that we have a better understanding of family functions and role responsibilities, an important question remains: How do family members learn, demonstrate, adjust, or relinquish these roles? To answer this question, we will more closely examine what family scholars refer to as **role appropriation** – a three-part, overlapping process of adopting a particular role via role expectations, role enactments, and role negotiations.[49]

Role Expectations

Role expectations refer to the models and norms that a society provides for how certain family roles should be enacted. Walk into any bookstore or look on a parenting website and you will see material on how to be a good parent, partner, grandparent, or stepparent. The media features many family role models through television specials, situation comedies, movies, or talk shows. Daily life within a community also serves as a source of role expectations. When you were growing up, your friends and neighbors probably all thought they knew who were the "good" mothers or the "bad" kids on the block or in the community. Religious and educational organizations and school leaders also set expectations for how family members should behave. Each of you has grown up with expectations for how people should function in family roles.

Cultural groups convey beliefs about parenting or spousal roles, which are learned by members of their community. In the Jewish tradition, for example, the role of mother is associated with the transmission of culture and primary values; as such, it carries particular significance and implies certain expectations.[50] Historically, African American women have worked outside the home, often as the sole or major breadwinner in order to support their families.[51] **Familism**, or the subordination of the personal interests and goals of an individual to the values and demands of the family, dominates life in many Latino families who value family commitment and unity. Familism can create stress in families – for example, staying in a difficult marriage to keep the family together.[52] In one example, a scholar studying Puerto Rican families found that women are gaining personal power by contributing financially to the household, although men may suffer some loss in status if their wives work.[53]

In addition, role expectations also arise from significant others and complementary others. **Significant others** are those persons you view as important and who provide you with models from which you develop role expectations. In addition to family members, a favorite teacher who combined a career with a family may influence your role choices. Thus, part of learning roles occurs by observing and imitating **role models** – persons whose behavior serves as a guide for others.

Complementary others are individuals who fulfill reciprocal role functions. During the later stages of romantic relationships, couples may spend long periods of time discussing their

expectations for a future spouse, looking for a partner who will fulfill different needs in family life, for example, “I want my partner to be home with the children until they go to school” or “I need a partner who will help parent my children from my first marriage.” A future stepparent may try to explore expectations with a future older stepchild; a parent and college-aged child may discuss expectations for their interaction during summer vacations.

When one parent dies or leaves the family, the other parent may expect a child to fulfill an emotional role of confidant or a task role of household helper. In stepfamilies, for example, some residential parents are prone to elevating the oldest child to the role of peer or emotional confidant, particularly in the early aftermath of a divorce and prior to remarrying.[54] Frequently, such an expectation places great pressure on the child, alienates the child from other siblings, and eventually interferes with the normal process of separating from the family at the appropriate developmental period.

PHOTO 8.2 Dual-career families face constant role negotiation.

Monkey Business Images/iStock

Finally, role expectations reflect an imagined view of yourself – the way you like to think about your own actions and self-presentation, or what you believe you should be like in your life. For example, a father may imagine himself telling his child about the facts of life. A teenager may imagine lecturing a younger sibling on avoiding drug use. Such imaginings are not just daydreams; they serve as a rehearsal for actual performance. How we actually communicate in families may be influenced by how we imagine and believe we should or will be. No matter what you imagine, your thoughts and feelings about your role in the family represent expectations – that is, until you enact your role with significant others.

Role Enactment

Role enactment describes all of the communication behaviors an individual uses to perform a role. As with role expectations, role performance reflects the individual's capacity for enacting the role. Persons in complementary or opposing roles affect your role performance. Have you ever tried to reason with a parent who sulks, pamper an independent grandparent, or correct a willful child? However, if two complementary family members perceive things in similar ways, it enhances role performance. Young adults living with their parents may believe that they should no longer be subject to curfews and notifying parents of their evening plans; this belief will be reinforced by parents who no longer ask for their whereabouts. If a mother's advice to her adult son and his wife about caring for their sick infant is appreciated and followed, the mother will likely continue to give such advice. Thus, the way others assume their roles and comment on your role affects how you enact your role.

Additionally, your background influences your behavior. For example, if certain communication behaviors are not part of your experiences or repertoire, they cannot magically appear in a particular situation. A father may wish he could talk with his son instead of yelling at him or giving orders, but he may have little experience communicating this way and may feel incompetent when discussing controversial subjects with his child. Self-confidence in attempting to fulfill a role also affects behavior. An inexperienced stepmother may not feel confident to express affection, either verbally or nonverbally, with her new stepchildren for many months or longer, especially when the stepfamily experiences struggles adjusting to their new circumstances. On occasion, people discover that they can function well in a role they did not expect or desire.

When trying to enact both work roles and family roles, partners' experiences may be somewhat different. Among a predominantly working-class population, women's sense of balance between their work and family roles depends, at least partially, on their gender ideology. Cisgender women who enact a more traditional gender ideology perceive more balance in their roles than women who hold less traditional gender ideologies, but cisgender men's gender ideology does not affect their sense of balance between work and family roles.[55] Some men attempt to enact both work and family fully, resulting in the "superdad" role. Likewise, an increasing number of gay partners have chosen to become parents. Because this option became available only relatively recently, those in the first generation of partnered, "intentional" fathers have few role models.[56] Therefore, these men face the communicative task of negotiating their roles as partners and parents as they create a newer family form.

Choosing to enact one role may affect a person's ability to assume other roles as well. When comparing how highly educated women and men enact roles in their personal and professional lives, for example, one researcher found that more women in the top 10% of earning power were childless at age 40, most by choice. Instead, enacting the very demanding role of a consultant, lawyer, doctor, or other professional left these women with very little time to pursue romantic relationships. In other instances, women chose not to become mothers after realizing the difficulty of a double bind of being told they can be anything they want in life but that it's impossible to have it all.[57] For male professionals, the opposite is often true. The more successful they are in their careers, the more likely they are to be married with children.[58]

Looking back at the "Competing Priorities" case study we used to open this chapter, how might Rebekah's decision about her graduate degree be influenced by her desires to enact competing roles? How might her expectations and her family's expectations of what it means to be a "mother," a

"wife," and a "graduate student" influence how she thinks about and talks about her family responsibilities?

Role Negotiation

Effective role enactment involves communication and negotiating agreement among those in related roles. To achieve agreement on enacting complementary roles, family members engage in **role negotiation**, a process whereby they interact and socially construct and structure their reality and give meaning to their roles (as we discussed in Chapter 2). When couples become parents, they need to interact and negotiate both parents' expectations and develop identities and roles that will function well in this new stage of life.[59] This critical use of communication applies to assuming and maintaining any family role. Thinking back to the case of Jarvis and his son Jamal at the beginning of this chapter, we see how bringing a new family member into the system requires role negotiation.

The role enactment process involves implicit or explicit negotiations with those family members in related roles. Discussions may involve reconstructing differences and exploring new ways to act regarding certain expectations, sometimes through direct confrontation or through experimentation and adjustments to discover how the other reacts to a new role behavior. For instance, becoming a new mother is associated with increased housework and more disagreements with spouses as compared to wives without children, although such increases in housework and spousal disagreements often do not hold true for husbands.[60] In same-sex couples, some gay fathers have reported being free of gender role expectations, which gives them greater flexibility in choosing responsibilities or allowing responsibilities to evolve based on personality and parenting preferences.[61] Finally, an individual's roles need to be integrated with other members' roles. Occasionally, family members must integrate the sometimes-conflicting roles of parent, partner, daughter, aunt, grandmother, and friend, all with their own expectations and demands and need for change at different life stages.

Frequently, role negotiation involves managing conflict. Individual family members may know what is expected of them, but some persons may not enact those expected behaviors. For example, a husband and wife may have agreed early in their marriage to share the provider role. However, after having a child, the wife may decide that she prefers instead to stay home with the baby. When this kind of change occurs, it requires adjustment in the family system, and a new style of interdependence between partners must be negotiated. When faced with transitions or stresses, family members often have to renegotiate their previously predictable agreement.[62]

Role conflict occurs when competing demands are made on an individual in the fulfillment of multiple social roles. When complementary or significant others have different expectations of another's role performance, conflict results. For example, an adult son who has moved to a different country may argue with his mother about how frequently he should e-mail, Zoom, or return home to visit. Likewise, role conflict frequently occurs when a divorced parent remarries, bringing a stepparent into the family system, as there is a lack of clear and institutionalized roles for stepfamily members.[63] One study of successful stepmothers found that role ambiguities and role conflicts were a common experience in the early years as they tried to figure out their different role functions, such as nurturing, protecting, coordinating, and disciplining children.[64]

Role conflict also occurs when a family member tries to enact multiple roles simultaneously that are incompatible or are difficult to enact together, such as in the example of Rebekah at the beginning

of the chapter. You may have experienced examples of role conflict in your own family. For instance, a 14-year-old boy who finds out that his 17-year-old sister is sneaking out of the house at night might experience role conflict between his role as the dependable son, who would tell his parents that something potentially dangerous was happening, and his role as a sibling, who wants his sister's approval. Frequently, grandparents who, by necessity, assume parental roles experience role conflict, although most report that support groups are helpful for managing these role conflicts.[65] Family communication is especially important when role conflicts occur, as family members will need to work out how to address these conflicts. Although family members may be able to resolve role conflicts by agreeing to change certain behaviors or expectations, sometimes the best people can do is manage the tensions associated with the conflict. For example, a daughter-in-law and mother-in-law may find ways to work out their respective roles in the family and learn to live with some role conflicts that they cannot resolve.[66]

It is not unusual for role conflicts to emerge from the work–life balance issues that arise in most households. For instance, researchers coined the term "the second shift" to describe how married women often work at taking care of the house and children after putting in a full day's work on the job.[67] Over the ensuing decades, most committed partnerships struggled with a variation of this issue. For example, the schedule of parents' work may affect family functioning, as one study of Canadian families found that parents who worked evenings, nights, and weekends were less effective parents and experienced poorer family functioning than parents who worked standard weekday hours.[68]

As you will read in later chapters, predictable and unpredictable life crises also affect the roles you assume and how you function in them. Unforeseen circumstances may alter life in such a way that roles change drastically from those we planned or enacted. For example, a woman who is childless by choice may find this choice challenged at the serious illness of a sister and becoming guardian to the sister's children. Regardless of the circumstances, mature and functional families come to understand how family communication functions to create, enact, and change family roles. They prioritize setting aside time to discuss and try to come to agreement on their roles and expectations. Just setting aside time to talk about the day can be important for couples, as researchers have found that couples who take time to debrief and share work experiences greatly increase their relational satisfaction.[69] Like everything else in families, roles are dynamic and continually shift over time. Role conflict can be heightened when individuals enact roles in ways that are inflexible and ill equipped to help couples and families adapt to changing life circumstances, making clear the important role of communication in developing functional and healthy role structures in family systems. Now that we have examined the primary tasks and responsibilities that families seek to fulfill, as well as the role appropriation process that individual members experience, let's turn our attention to typologies that function as common conceptual tools that communication scholars use to describe different forms of couple and family functioning.

BOX 8.3 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. How are your role expectations for “daughter” or “son” influenced by the media you consume? How are your expectations influenced by your extended family and friends?
2. What communication behaviors do you use to enact the role of “child” to your parents? If you have siblings, what communication behaviors do you use to enact the role of “sibling”? How are they similar to or different from the behaviors you use to enact the role of “child”?
3. Think of a time when you experienced role conflict with your parents or with other family members. How did you talk about the stress and tension you felt from juggling competing demands on your time or managing multiple social roles?

COMMUNICATION IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF COUPLES AND FAMILIES

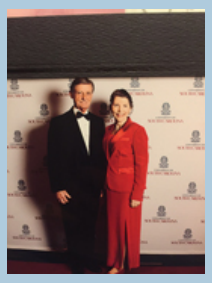
Couple and family typologies represent another way to explore how roles develop through family interaction. Many family researchers and therapists believe that family behavior and organization can be classified into various typologies, depending on structural features of families and the behavior patterns of family members. Typologies are useful to researchers and students of family communication because they help bring order to phenomena studied in family communication. In this final section, we will discuss two typologies of couples based on marital ideology and cohabitation status. We will then conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of two family typologies that were developed using measures of family interaction.

Couple-Oriented Typologies

Mary Anne Fitzpatrick and her colleagues have developed what is considered by many communication scholars to be the most widely recognized typology of straight marital couples.[70] In her early work, Fitzpatrick explored a variety of communication behaviors and relational dynamics to find out which behaviors and relational patterns made a difference in maintaining straight romantic relationships. She identified eight meaningful factors that affect role enactment within marital relationships: (a) conflict avoidance, (b) assertiveness, (c) sharing, (d) the ideology of traditionalism, (e) the ideology of uncertainty and change, (f) temporal (time) regularity, (g) undifferentiated space, and (h) autonomy. After assessing these eight dimensions using a sample of nearly 1,000 married couples, Fitzpatrick identified three couple types: *traditionals*, *separates*, and *independents*. Whereas “pure” couple types included a husband and wife who both identified as having the same marital ideology (e.g., both identifying as independents or traditionals), “mixed” couple types included a husband and wife who described their relationship differently (e.g., an independent wife and a separate husband). Based on this distinction, Fitzpatrick found that 20% of her sample included pure traditionals, 17% were pure separates, and 22% were pure independents. All told, about 60% of her sample could be classified as pure types and 40% as mixed, with the most common mixed marriage including a traditional wife and a separate husband.[71] Before you read descriptions of each couple type, take a look at how Dr. Fitzpatrick’s family experiences shaped her interest in communication between husbands and wives in the following “Family Portrait.”

BOX 8.4 FAMILY PORTRAIT: DR. MARY ANNE FITZPATRICK, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Dr. Fitzpatrick's website: https://sc.edu/study/colleges_schools/cic/faculty-staff/fitzpatrick_mary_anne.php



What drew you to study family communication?

When I started graduate school, the interpersonal communication research at the time seemed lifeless. Focusing on initial interaction between strangers, this research did not answer what struck me as the vital questions about how communication functioned in social and personal relationships. My doctoral dissertation was the first in the field to focus on communication between husbands and wives.

What are your main areas of family scholarship?

I developed ways to categorize various types of marriages and families according to their philosophies of communication. These marital types predict not only how family members interact with one another but also the psychological and social outcomes of these patterns of family communication.

How has your own family influenced what you teach and study?

I was raised in a large family. Evenings around the dinner table were boisterous, and telling a good story was our social currency. Learning early the turn-taking of good conversation, I was intrigued with the mechanics of language, and the complexity of human communication. I wondered why some people are more successful at building relationships with others and able to influence the attitudes and behaviors of spouses, parents, siblings, peers and colleagues. These questions motivate my research with married, engaged and dating couples, children, and families.

How can family communication students use your research in their own family life?

My research is empirical social science and not a collection of personal opinions or preferences. Systematic research in family communication can help students to develop a knowledge base of

evidence that relates to their own lives. My work shows that there is not one perfect way to be or form a family. Each family member mutually influences one another and co-creates the positive or negative outcomes of family process.

Independent couples accept uncertainty and change. They pay limited attention to schedules and traditional values. Independents represent the most autonomous of the types but do considerable sharing and negotiate autonomy. Independents are more likely to report interpersonal conflict than the other two types given their desires to negotiate daily household chores and activities, and they support androgynous, flexible sex roles within their relationship.

Separate couples differ from independents by avoiding conflict more regularly, desiring more differentiated space, craving regular schedules, and sharing less. In their personal and social relationships, separates maintain a distance from people, even their spouses. They experience little sense of togetherness or autonomy, and they usually oppose an androgynous gender orientation.

Traditional couples uphold a fairly conventional belief system and resist change or uncertainty because it threatens their routines. This leads to a high degree of interdependence and relatively low levels of autonomy. They will engage in conflict when necessary, but would rather avoid it. Traditionals, like separates, demonstrate strong sex-typed roles and oppose an androgynous orientation.[72]

The six mixed types of couples can be identified by creating different combinations of the three pure label types: traditional/separate, separate/traditional, independent/separate, separate/independent, traditional/independent, and independent/traditional. These are not a category of "leftovers," but represent many different couple systems that continue to evolve and change over time.[73] In the separate/traditional category, for example, couples had low consensus on a number of relational issues, but they were moderately cohesive. These couples claimed high satisfaction for their relationship and outwardly expressed much affection.[74] More recently, researchers have continued using the couple types in empirical research. For example, separate couples score lowest on commitment, dedication, and satisfaction among the couple types.[75] Although researchers have indicated that traditional couples tend to be the most satisfied, followed in succession by mixed couples (i.e., traditional husband/separate wife), independents, and separates, they have also maintained that each couple type has the potential to create a satisfactory marriage.[76]

Table 8.1 summarizes the ways in which couple types have responded to a variety of relationship measures, including sex roles and gender perceptions. In predicting communication, for instance, you might expect traditional families to express affection and share the role functions discussed earlier in this chapter, whereas independents are more open to change, and thus, might be more open to dual-career marriages and sharing the functions of providing and housekeeping.

Understanding the different couple types is helpful for thinking about the potential problems that may occur when communicating about role functions. This is especially true for the separates who have not addressed, or cared to address, the interdependence/autonomy issue in their marriage. Fitzpatrick uses the label "emotionally divorced" for this type because separates are least likely to express their feelings to their partners. In her explorations of dialectical theory, communication theorist Leslie Baxter has argued that Fitzpatrick's traditionals privilege continuity over discontinuity, with independents privileging change over continuity, and separates somewhere in the middle.

TABLE 8.1 Couple Type Differences on Relational Measures

Couple Types	*Marital Satisfaction*	*Cohesion*	*Consensus*	*Affectional Expression*	*Sex Roles*	*Psychological Gender States (Wives Only)*
Traditionals	High	High	High	Moderately high	Conventional	Feminine
Independents	Low	Moderately high	Low	Low	Nonconventional	Sex-typed androgynous
Separates	Low	Low	Moderately high	Low	Conventional	Feminine sex-typed
Separates/traditionals	Moderately high	Moderately high	Moderately high	High	Conventional	Feminine sex-typed
Other mixed types	Moderately high	Low	Low	Moderately high	Depends on mixed type	Depends on mixed type

Although Fitzpatrick's marital typology has more than 40 years of empirical research to back it up, it is not the only attempt that family scholars have made to understand how different couples communicate to maintain satisfying and healthy relationships. In fact, scholars have recently given greater attention to different types of cohabiting couples in an effort to understand how cohabitation influences later marital and family functioning. Take a look at "Family Matters" to see what researchers are finding among different types of cohabiting couples.

BOX 8.5 FAMILY MATTERS: COMMUNICATION, CONFLICT, AND SATISFACTION AMONG DIFFERENT TYPES OF COHABITING COUPLES

Using a sample of 1,365 cohabiting couples, family scholars Brian Willoughby, Jason Carroll, and Dean Busby at Brigham Young University identified five different types of cohabiting couples based on partners' responses to three questions: (a) "In your relationship, who is moving faster toward marriage?" (b) "How long will it be from now until you and your partner marry?" and (c) "Are you engaged to be married?" Three of the five cohabiting types included partners who were engaged to be married: *incongruent engaged cohabiters* included individuals who felt that the relationship was moving faster (or slower) toward marriage than they would like or who felt pressure to marry from their partner, whereas the other two types, *engaged cohabiters moving fast* and *engaged cohabiters moving slow*, had congruence between partners regarding their movement toward marriage, just with different speeds. The other two types of cohabiting couples were not engaged, with *incongruent non-engaged cohabiters* experiencing ambiguity over whether or not their relationship was moving toward marriage and at what speed, and *non-engaged cohabiters without marital plans* reporting that neither partner was moving toward marriage.

After controlling for differences in relationship length, race, education, marital importance, and religiosity in the study, Willoughby and his colleagues found that incongruent engaged cohabiters (a) were less satisfied in their relationship than engaged cohabiters moving fast or slow and (b) used less positive communication than individuals in engaged dating relationships, engaged moving fast cohabiting relationships, and engaged moving slow cohabiting relationships. More importantly, they found that individuals in non-engaged cohabiting relationships tended to report the most negative relational and communicative outcomes of those in any of the couple types. Consequently, their research not only advances our understanding of how cohabitation and communication may differ depending on partners' expectations of marriage, it also demonstrates how such differences influence couples' satisfaction and stability. In doing so, their findings illustrate that how partners move toward creating a new family matters.

For further reading, see Willoughby, B. J., Carroll, J. S., & Busby, D. M. (2011). The different effects of "living together": Determining and comparing types of cohabiting couples. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 29*(3), 397–419. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407511431184

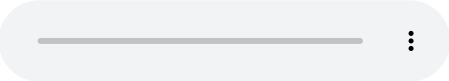
Whether based on marital ideologies or cohabitation status, couple typologies help us understand meaningful differences in, and needs for, different communication behaviors. These typologies help researchers and therapists more fully understand the variability that exists in couples' interaction patterns and help couples interact most effectively to meet their goals. In fact, one of the leading marital researchers, John Gottman, developed a well-known couple typology based on conflict styles. We will discuss his typology in Chapter 10. In the final section of this chapter, however, we want to introduce you to family typologies, which move the focus away from the couple to the family as a system or group.

Family Typologies

You may recall from Chapter 2 that families can be understood and classified by their family communication patterns, particularly conformity and conversation orientations. You may also recall that researchers can use high/low distinctions on these two orientations to identify four family types: (a) *consensual*, (b) *pluralistic*, (c) *protective*, and (d) *laissez-faire* families. As we noted in Chapter 2, this typology recognizes that families can function well with different types of behaviors and that there is not just one functional way to communicate.[77]

In addition to these four family types, other researchers have continued efforts to understand the variability that exists in other family forms. For example, one of the authors of this textbook, Paul Schrodt, has developed a typology of stepfamilies based on how stepchildren view their families as a whole, as well as their relationship with their primary stepparent (i.e., the stepparent with whom they have lived the longest if they have more than one stepparent). He identified five types of stepfamilies that differed in their communication patterns in meaningful ways.[78] First, *bonded stepfamilies* were characterized by low levels of dissension and avoidance, and relatively high levels of stepfamily involvement, flexibility, and expressiveness. Stepchildren in bonded stepfamilies were more likely than stepchildren in other family types to think of their stepparent as a parent. Second, *functional stepfamilies* were characterized by moderately high levels of stepfamily involvement, flexibility, and

expressiveness, as well as moderately low levels of stepfamily dissension and avoidance. Stepchildren in these families tended to think of their stepparents as friends rather than as parents.



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Third, *ambivalent stepfamilies* were characterized by demonstrating higher levels of stepfamily dissension and avoidance and by demonstrating more moderate levels of stepfamily involvement, flexibility, and expressiveness. Consistent with their name, stepchildren in these families reported mixed emotions toward their stepfamily. Fourth, *evasive stepfamilies* were characterized by moderately high levels of dissension and avoidance, moderately low levels of stepfamily involvement and flexibility, and expressiveness. Evasive stepfamilies functioned less well than bonded, functional, and ambivalent stepfamilies, due primarily to a lack of open communication within the stepparent–stepchild relationship and in the stepfamily as a whole. Last, *conflictual stepfamilies* were characterized by somewhat higher levels of expressiveness than evasive stepfamilies, as well as the highest levels of stepfamily dissension and avoidance, and the lowest levels of stepfamily involvement and flexibility among the five types.

Not only did Schrodt identify different types of stepfamilies, but he illustrated the validity and utility of his typology by reporting meaningful differences in communication competence and mental health among stepchildren in the five family types. For example, he found that stepchildren from bonded and functional stepfamilies reported higher levels of communication competence for themselves and for their stepparents, as well as fewer mental health symptoms, than stepchildren from ambivalent, evasive, and conflictual stepfamilies.[79] His findings help illustrate why typologies are helpful to researchers and practitioners as they seek to understand complex patterns of family interaction using much simpler conceptual schemes.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we relied on an interactional approach to roles to stress the effect of family interaction on role development and performance and vice versa. We began by discussing the McMaster model of family functioning, a model that describes five essential family functions that serve as the basis for family roles. We gave particular attention to aspects of each function where family member roles rely more heavily on communication. We then examined how roles are appropriated within families via family members' role expectations, role enactments, and role negotiations.

Finally, we explored a variety of couple and family typologies, as typologies provide useful tools for researchers and practitioners in their efforts to render family members' interactions more understandable and predictable. Whereas couple typologies make use of partners' marital ideologies, gender orientations, and other communication behaviors, family typologies move the focus away from the dyad to the family system as a whole by focusing on group dynamics. Regardless of their particular focus, however, typologies can help us understand the communication behaviors and patterns that undergird a family's relational environment.

Key Words

Cisgender
Cisnormativity
Complementary others
Dual-career couple
Dual-earner couple
Familism
Family roles
Gender role expectations
Kinship maintenance
Role appropriation
Role conflict
Role enactment
Role expectations
Role models
Role negotiation
Significant others
Spillover

FLASHCARDS

refers to a person whose gender identity corresponds with that person's sex assigned at birth

or the beliefs, practices, and communication patterns that privilege cisgender people at the expense of transgender and gender variant others, by exploring how cisgender women use communication to cisgender family

are individuals who fulfill reciprocal role functions

refers to a partnership in which each person pursues a full-time career and expects to advance up the career ladder

both partners are employed, but one or both of the partners work in careers that do not offer a career ladder or the promise of professional advancement

or the subordination of the personal interests and goals of an individual to the values and demands of the family, dominates life in many Latino families who value family commitment and unity

recurring patterns of behavior developed through the social interactions that family members enact in order to fulfill family functions

which refer to the behaviors that family members anticipate masculine and feminine individuals will enact to fulfill family responsibilities

One complex and often overlooked maintenance function involves managing and nurturing kinship ties within the extended family network

a three-part, over-lapping process of adopting a particular role via role expectations, role enactments, and role negotiations

occurs when competing demands are made on an individual in the fulfillment of multiple social roles

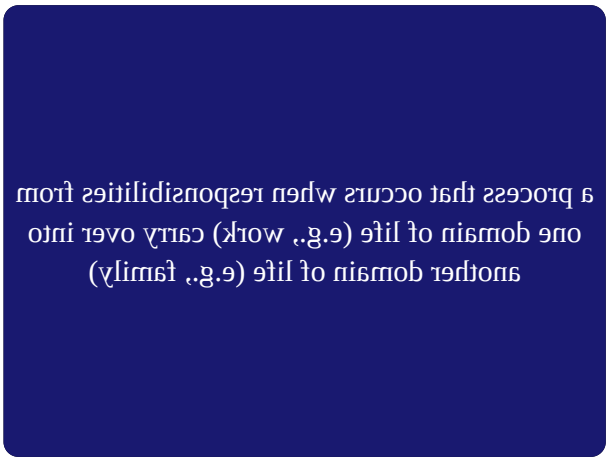
describes all of the communication behaviors an individual uses to perform a role

refer to the models and norms that a society provides for how certain family roles should be enacted

persons whose behavior serves as a guide for others

a process whereby they interact and socially construct and structure their reality and give meaning to their roles

develop role expectations
provide you with models from which you
are those persons you view as important and who


a process that occurs when responsibilities from
one domain of life (e.g., work) carry over into
another domain of life (e.g., family)

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SECTION 3

Communication and Family Adaptability

CHAPTER 9

Power, Influence, and Decision-Making in Families

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BOX 9.1

How do family members communicate power and influence? What types of strategies do family members use when persuading other family members to do what they want them to do? How do families make important decisions? In this chapter, we explore how families use power and influence to accomplish goals, manage family responsibilities, and make decisions. After reading this chapter, you will be able to

1. Compare and contrast five types of resources that individuals use when exercising power.
2. Summarize how power is negotiated and expressed in marital and parent–child relationships.

3. Identify and briefly describe different types of influence strategies that family members use when giving compliance-seeking messages.
4. Explain how power, influence, and decision-making are closely tied together.
5. Analyze factors that affect family decision-making processes.

DECIDING TO BECOME DADS

When Alberto and Michael fell in love four years ago, they had a series of conversations about their future, including whether they would ever become parents together. At that time, Michael declared his strong desire to be a father while Alberto indicated he was open to thinking about it. Two years later at their commitment ceremony, they told their guests that parenthood would be in their future – somehow. Since then, they have held many conversations on the pros and cons of reaching parenthood through adoption or by using a surrogate. At first, Alberto believed it would be important for one of them to have a biological tie to the child, although Michael felt so less strongly. When they learned of the large financial commitment involved, however, their path to fatherhood seemed closed. After watching two sets of friends adopt children through a local state agency, they started searching the Web for further options. Reading the stories of other couples who had successfully adopted and seeing their friends with their babies made this all seem more possible. They met with a social worker and decided to pursue adoption. The agency personnel indicated that most birth parents tended to request an open adoption, giving them some contact with the family as the child grows up. After much discussion, Michael and Alberto decided to agree to an open or closed adoption and to accept a child of any ethnic or racial background. After many months, they were paired with a single pregnant birth mother who

desired an open adoption. At this point, the two anxious men are waiting for a phone call from the agency inviting them to meet their new son.

These days, Alberto and Michael are trying to decide what a child would call each of them. Michael prefers “Daddy,” whereas Alberto is considering “Papa” or “Pops.” At this point, all they want to hear are the words, “Come meet your son!”

FOREGOING A FAMILY FEUD

Robert groaned when he got the phone call from his mother. His father had “blown up” at his grandfather, and now his parents were not speaking to his grandparents, despite living next door to each other in the town Robert grew up in. Robert’s 35 years of life had been peppered with similar fights and splits. He had not seen his aunt and uncle since he was 12 because of a falling out they had with his grandparents, and he had had a similar issue with his grandparents during his college years. Robert had just accepted that this was the way his family was and had moved across the country when he married to get away from all of this family drama. Although he appreciated the convenience of staying in touch and keeping up on what is happening with the family by e-mail and social media, all too often he would get drawn into family problems and worry about them constantly. Robert had two young children and was planning a week-long stay in his hometown this summer. He did not want to bring his wife and children into this family feud, and he certainly did not want to worry about having to separate time with his parents and his grandparents. He had to do something.

Robert considered many courses of action. He thought about threatening not to visit if his parents and grandparents couldn’t solve their problems. He was the only child, however, and he knew that they would be very sad not to see their (great) grandchildren. But he also wasn’t sure he’d actually follow through on such a threat. He could try reasoning with them and explaining to them why this was going to be so difficult for him. He had tried this before when they had had their last falling out, however, and both

sides were just so stubborn that it didn't work. Ultimately, Robert decided to call his family's minister, Pastor Michael, and ask him for help.

Whom do you ask for permission to skip a family reunion? If you believe a family member is not taking care of their health, what do you do or say? When are the times that you yield to the wishes of another person in the family and when do you stand your ground? How do members of your family communicate to make decisions? When you made a choice about where to enroll for college, how involved were your family members in this decision? The answers to these questions tell you something about power, influence, and decision-making in your family. Whether it involves a major decision, such as the one that Alberto and Michael faced in the opening case to adopt a new member into the family, or a more minor decision such as where to eat dinner on a family fun night, family members' abilities to influence one another are related to power and ultimately affect how families make decisions. Communication is the central process by which power and influence are enacted in the family system and family members negotiate decisions. In addition, all three processes influence how we interact within the family and what we discuss or withhold. Consequently, in this chapter, we will address the development and communication of power, influence, and decision-making processes in family relationships.

As you probably realize from your own experience, the concepts of family power, influence, and decision-making are interrelated. In the second case to open this chapter, for example, Robert has to decide if he will try to insert himself into the conflict between his parents and grandparents by threatening not to let his parents see the grandchildren. In a similar vein, one family's decision to go to Disney World for summer vacation may be the result of a 10-year-old's persistent attempts to influence their parents and sisters. In another family, a father may decide that because he paid a $400 fee for his son's martial arts class, his son cannot quit the class. Although the concepts of power, influence, and decision-making are closely connected, they are nevertheless distinct. Family members use different

types of power; one family member's power does not always result in gaining influence or having others agree with that family member's decisions. As you read this chapter, think of the ways in which power, influence, and decision-making have been negotiated and enacted in your own family of origin, as well as in families that you have observed.

THE DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNICATION OF POWER IN FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Power is present in all human relationships and interactions. In families, **power** can be defined as "the ability (potential or actual) of an individual to change the behavior of other family members."[1] Although individual family members may enact power in the family, subsets within the family or whole families may enact power to influence other family members. For instance, mothers and fathers have parental power to influence a child, adult siblings may have power to influence an elderly parent, or a branch of a family that has significant economic resources may exert a powerful influence over the decisions of an entire family system. Thus, from a communication perspective, you learn that power operates transactionally in a family system, meaning that it does not belong to an individual; rather, it is negotiated in a relationship between two or more persons.[2] In other words, you need other people around to have power. If you lived alone on a desert island, you would have no power without other humans with whom you interact. The same is true in families as no one has power without the presence of others.

It is simply impossible to live in a family without encountering power negotiations or engaging in them yourself. At first glance, you might think of power in families as something that only adults wield, yet children also enact power within the family.[3] For instance, a child quickly learns that she can get attention and snap parents into action by claiming to have a stomachache and demanding to stay home from school. The first few times this happens, the family system is thrown into last-minute chaos as the

parents negotiate who will stay home from work with the child. Like everything else in families, however, the negotiation of power is ongoing and dynamic, as the family recalibrates itself. In the previous situation, the parents may realize what is happening and next time tell their daughter she may stay home from school on Friday, but because she is ill, they will need to cancel her slumber party on Saturday. Within ten minutes of learning this, she may display a miraculous recovery.

The power dimension in a family system may vary greatly over time, depending on a host of factors, such as family structure, developmental stage, external stresses, and the family's economic, cultural, or intellectual resources. We cannot assume that all families experience and exercise power in similar ways. Family systems are rooted in culture, values, and histories in which power processes may operate differently.

Within a given culture, there will be power differentials based on ethnicity, gender, age, or economic advantage. For example, an older immigrant generation may use religion as a way to cope with powerlessness,[4] whereas a younger generation may increase power through education. When children translate for foreign-language-speaking parents (i.e., *language brokering*), they may experience an elevated place of power in the family compared to children who do not language broker given that their parents depend on them for communication.[5] In some religions, husbands are accorded greater power than wives. Women may have additional power when it comes to making decisions about caring for infants. In families in which a husband stays home as the primary caregiver, however, he may have more power over decisions regarding the child. As we learned with relational dialectics theory (see Chapter 3), in any given culture, certain discourses are given a central or powerful position and others are pushed to the margins.[6] In the case of the stay-at-home dad, gendered discourse that holds women as primarily responsible for children's care is dominant and these fathers may be judged outside the family as second-class parents or as too weak for the workforce. At the same time, researcher Karla Bergen interviewed women who lived away from their

families for work and found that they received a much harsher judgment as a parent than men who did the same thing.[7]

It is important to understand that power can also affect communication in family relationships in situations that do not influence making decisions or overt attempts to persuade other family members. Power appears both in everyday conversations and during intimate self-disclosure.[8] Thus, in order for us to understand the complexity of power and how it is communicated, we will first examine different aspects of power and how power is developed within family systems.

Aspects of Power in Family Systems

Although power can be conceptualized in multiple ways, family scientists Ronald Cromwell and David Olson described power using three key attributes: (a) power bases, (b) power processes, and (c) power outcomes.[9] Their typology provides a starting point for discussing how power emerges in different family relationships, ranging from marital expressions of power to parental, sibling, and other extended kinship expressions of power. Figure 9.1 provides a visual preview that highlights the role of family communication within each attribute of power.

Power Bases

Family power emanates from resources that are used by family members as they attempt to exert control in specific situations. **Resources** consist of whatever is perceived as rewarding to an individual or a relationship; they can include anything that one partner makes available to the other to satisfy needs or attain goals.[10] In general, there are five types of resources from which individuals may derive power: normative, economic, affective, personal, and cognitive resources.[11] Let's briefly examine each type (or base) of power before turning our attention to power processes.

1. **Normative resources** refer to the family's values and to the cultural or societal expectations of where authority lies. Normative definitions represent the culturally internalized expectations of how family relationships should function – that is, the perceived role expectations and obligations of members. For example, in many cultures, family norms stipulate that the mother should have the power in managing the children's daily care and activities. Interestingly, in Turkish families, one researcher found that the higher the level of education a father has, the less perceived power he has in relation to his wife and son.[12] The researcher speculated that fathers with more education operate under a more egalitarian mode in the family.

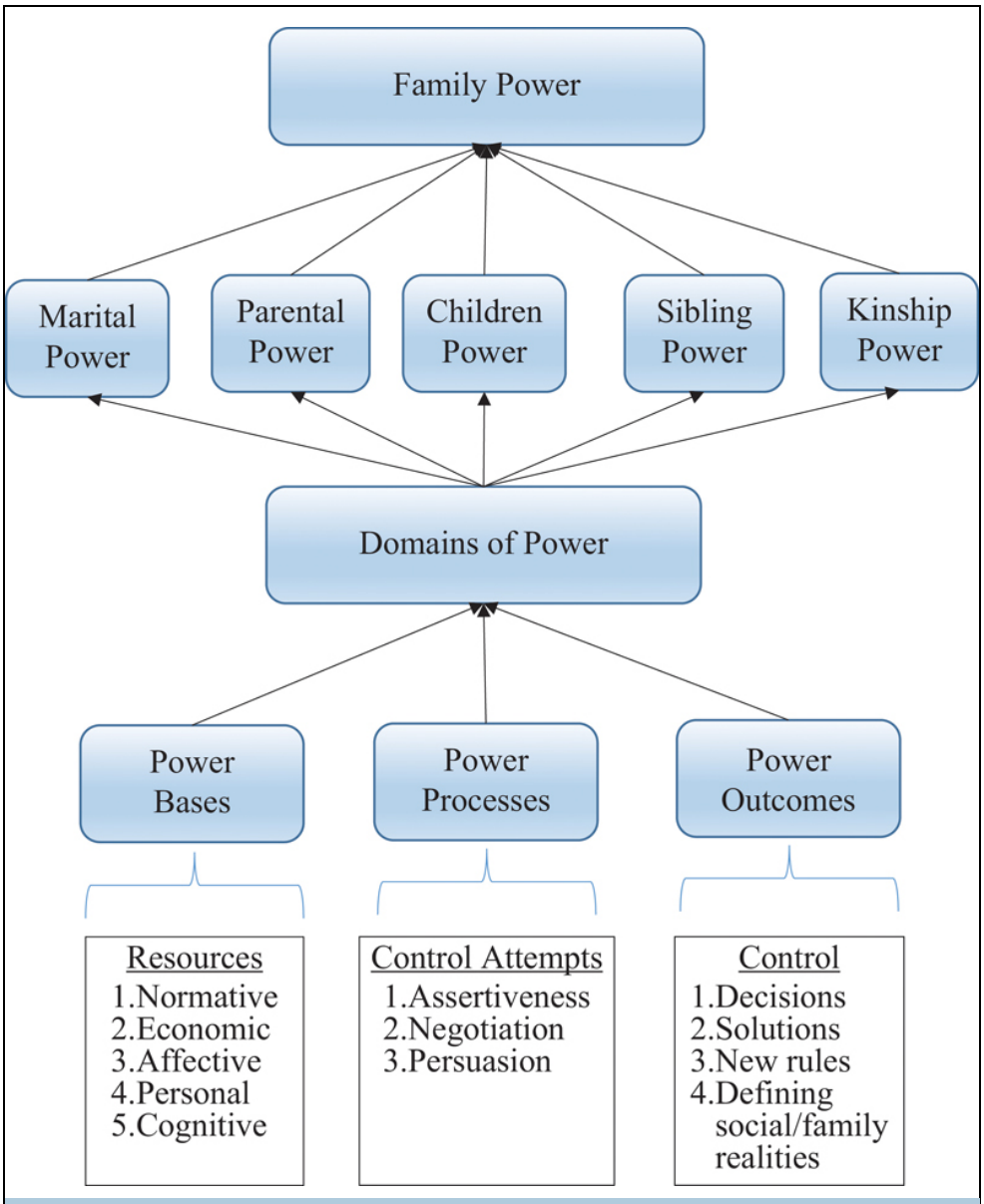


FIGURE 9.1 Units of analysis and domains of power in family relationships.

Note. Adapted from McDonald, G. W. (1980). Family power: The assessment of a decade of theory and research, 1970–1979. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 42*(4), 841–852.

2. **Economic resources** refer to the monetary control exerted by family members as persons designated to make financial decisions. Economic power comes from wages earned and money saved or inherited, and thus, family breadwinners often have power over this resource. For

instance, in some families, a bread-winning parent may refer to the household income as “my money.” Power differentials can also occur due to changes in economic resources. In the wake of the Great Recession of 2008 in the United States, for example, husbands and wives experienced different stress reactions to high economic uncertainty when discussing family finances, which in turn predicted diminished mental health for both partners.[13]

3. **Affective resources** reflect involvement, commitment, nurturing, and the power to give or withhold affection. For instance, a caring foster parent has the power to provide her foster daughter with affection hoping that it will result in trust and increased self-esteem, or a father may try and change the behavior of an adolescent who broke curfew by withholding his normal affection.
4. **Personal resources** refer to a family member’s individual characteristics that afford certain kinds of power, such as personality, physical appearance, and role competence.[14] They also include interpersonal factors for which the individual would be perceived as attractive or competent, and therefore accorded power. For example, a grandson may have the ability to make his grandparents laugh by talking in a funny voice. He soon learns that using this voice allows him to say things that otherwise would get him into trouble.
5. **Cognitive resources** refer to perceptions of power that family members have to influence their own and others’ actions and to affect others. It deals with using intelligence to logically determine what power options are available. For instance, some children learn at a young age what strategies to use when trying to get what they want from different family members.

Although each of the five power bases can be invoked in different situations, it is likely that no family member possesses all five power bases equally or uses all of them in a given situation or with a given person. Some power bases may never be used, whereas others may be used in combination, in certain situations, or with certain family members. For

instance, as a partner in a prominent law firm, Samantha may use normative and economic power resources in her interactions with her husband, and simultaneously use cognitive and affective resources in her interactions with her young children.

Now that we have discussed five types of resources from which individual family members draw power and influence, let's turn our attention to how power is used within family interactions.

Power Processes

Power processes refer to how power is used in family interactions more generally, as well as to how power is used in family communication practices that influence family discussions, arguments, and decision-making, specifically.[15] These practices include assertiveness, negotiation, and persuasion, which we will discuss later in this chapter.[16] Effective communicators understand power processes and how to communicate in ways that are competent, meaning they communicate in ways that are appropriate and effective; they understand how to make arguments and adapt their communication in different situations.[17] Family members may have normative or economic power bases to draw from, but they need to know how to communicate effectively and appropriately to make the best use of those power bases. Powerful people may use nonverbal cues to communicate power – for example, they may stand when others are sitting, speak first or most during interactions, or establish more direct eye contact (i.e., "stare someone down").[18]

Messages created by ill or dysfunctional members can also influence family power. For example, families with alcoholic members may have learned just how powerful that member can be. Everyone may learn to tiptoe around the drinker and develop strategies to minimize the alcoholic's verbal abuse. This places the alcoholic in a central and powerful position within the family, although they may be talked about as weak or helpless. Conversely, when an adult alcoholic makes progress toward sobriety, it is not unusual for their partner to unconsciously undermine the drinker's

recovery in order to maintain the respected position as the competent one and the dependence of the alcoholic upon the sober partner's help.[19] Therefore, a family member who acts helpless can control the other's behavior in a relationship just as effectively as another who dominates.

Power Outcomes

The third and final attribute of power in family relationships is **power outcomes**, which refer more generally to who makes decisions and is able to influence others in the family. Essentially, this refers to who wins or gets their way.[20] These outcomes include decisions, solutions, new rules or procedures, emotional effects, and feelings about the decisions.[21] In this respect, at least one family member gets their way, or receives rights or privileges of influence.

Power bases influence power outcomes. Family members who hold normative positions of authority oftentimes wield the greatest power. For instance, looking back at the second case study we used to open this chapter, Robert is contemplating whether or not to use his authority as a parent (i.e., a normative resource) to "threaten" his grandparents with the potential of not seeing their great-grandchildren (i.e., also an affective resource), hoping for the outcome of positively influencing his extended family's quarreling. In other families, the balance of power rests with the partner who contributes the greatest economic resources.

Hierarchies in the family system also establish guidelines for power processes that affect power outcomes. Specifically, family members may have orchestration power or implementation power.[22] Orchestration power means that only certain family members control family life and make critical decisions that determine the family's lifestyle. The person with orchestration power may delegate unimportant and time-consuming decisions to the partner or older child who derives implementation power by carrying out these decisions. For example, a mother may tell her 10-year-old son to find his 6-year-old brother and make sure he cleans his room. In this case, the mother has the orchestration power as she made the

decision that the younger child needed to clean the room. But she gave the older child implementation power by asking him to carry out that decision.

It is important to remember that each family member uses a variety of power sources relevant to their goals and resources. Although there are times when a family member has an unshakable power base, in most situations, family members must interact and negotiate power as they attempt to co-create mutually acceptable outcomes. Likewise, a parent may believe that they have the normative resources to demand that an adolescent refrain from driving while texting, yet in most cases, parents and adolescents may best be served by sharing power via open communication and discussing the issue. In some families and in some cultures, traditional roles, including the biosocial norm of male dominance, are clearly defined. Since no one challenges them, the family operates as if that were the only way to function. For immigrant families that move to another culture with different gender power norms, however, this can be a challenge, especially as children become part of the new culture and fulfill the role of language broker for the family.[23]

As you can see from our discussion thus far, each family member has a variety of resources or bases of power from which to draw when attempting to influence other family members' decisions. We hope that you now have a better understanding of how power is negotiated and outcomes are achieved through family interaction, yet you may still have questions about how power develops within families over time. To answer this question, we turn our attention to how power develops within families before looking more closely at how members attempt to influence each other.

Power Development

Due to the systemic nature of family relationships, power develops through a transactional process. For instance, an alcoholic cannot control a spouse unless the spouse permits it by refusing to detach from the drama.[24] A mother relinquishes her own personal control when she gives an "acting-out" child power over her. Only the small child who has limited means of

resisting power moves must accept certain power outcomes – for example, an abused child has few means of resisting punishment. In some cultures, gender norms limit power positions of women in families. In what follows, we will look more closely at the development of power in marital and parent–child relationships.

Marriage and Power

Marital power reflects the extent to which one partner loves and needs the other. It is often measured by looking at spouses' dependent love for one another based on the belief that the spouse with the strongest emotional involvement in the relationship is the less powerful one.[25] The spouse with the strongest feelings of attachment emerges in a less powerful position because the person with the least interest more easily controls the one who is more involved. The balance of such power in a relationship can affect how spouses respond physiologically to conflict.[26] In addition, you may likely see differences in power negotiations within different types of married couples, such as the ones we discussed in Chapter 8 – for example, you may see a more patriarchal power relationship among traditional couples and a more egalitarian power relationship among independent couples.

Power relationships in marriage may change over time as partners age, become more confident, achieve additional education or economic power, increase trust in one another, or have other experiences that alter the initial power balance and outcomes in the relationship over the years. In other words, couples may enter a relationship with unequal power but gradually achieve greater balance over time.

In addition, marital power is also heavily influenced by culture. This is particularly apparent when marital couples immigrate to the United States from a more patriarchal society. In a recent study, researchers compared two groups of Chinese immigrant couples – those in which the husband had been arrested for marital violence and those in which the husband had not. Both groups had experienced a shift in marital power such that the wives

had more power following immigration. In couples where the husband had been violent, wives had gained more education than their husbands as a result of immigration. In couples where there was no history of violence, however, both spouses had gained education, and the husbands had also gained more income than their wives. The researchers concluded that the violent men may have felt the power imbalance favoring their wives more than the nonviolent men and that they may have used physical violence to regain some of this power.[27]

As we mentioned earlier, families with ill members will recognize how power transactionally affects all members, and this is especially true for married couples. A couple with an alcoholic partner or one with a serious disease, for instance, will often see shifts in the balance of power. In other ways, a spouse might influence how their partner experiences illness by refuting or questioning their health complaints. Specifically, researchers have identified four statements that reflect family members' contestations of an individual's health complaints: (a) "You are not being rational," (b) "You are not trying," (c) "Your symptoms do not make sense," and (d) "You are not being yourself." Not surprisingly, an individual who questions their partner's health complaints in these ways takes their partner less seriously, perceives them as less trustworthy, and provides less support.[28]

Highly skewed relationships in which one partner is overly dominant often experience greater violence when the partners are unskilled at communicating and negotiating power and control.[29] Abusive partners aggravate one another through domineering behaviors. If both attempt control and neither submits, conflict escalates. In Chapter 10, we will examine in greater detail how power and control are expressed in destructive conflict patterns that create abusive and/or violent family relationships.

Parents, Children, and Power

In addition to the marital relationship, parents and children need to be included in any discussion of family power because they influence family

interactions, as their words and behaviors affect the development of family rules. Legally and socially, parents are expected to control and be responsible for their children's behavior. Although children are often viewed as followers of parental directives, they are also often active power brokers in the family.[30] When you think about the addition of an infant to a family system, you quickly realize that the baby's needs influence when the parents eat and sleep (or not), the family's schedule, and use of economic resources. As children develop and mature, they may struggle to establish their position in the family, to gain certain resources, or to establish an identity. Alberto and Michael, the gay couple waiting to adopt in the case at the start of this chapter, are likely well aware of some of the challenges their children may face as children of same-sex parents.[31] In many single-parent families as well as dual-earner families, younger children and adolescents may assume more personal and domestic responsibilities, experiences that not only affect their power but may also enhance their maturity and self-reliance.

Sometimes children influence the interactions and outcomes of power struggles by using power plays such as interruptions or screaming. Children often become adept at playing one parent against the other. "Daddy said I could do it" or "If Mom was here, she'd let me" has echoed through most homes. In some families, one spouse consciously or unconsciously co-opts a child into the role of ally in order to increase the strength of their power. Children also gain power by forming alliances with one parent. This may be because children feel they have insufficient power to change other family members' behaviors.[32] In abusive families, children may keep important information about abuse or neglect from other family members or outsiders in order to maintain the family system or because they fear additional abuse.[33]

Children may also form alliances in families that may increase their power, either over a period of time or only for reaching a specific decision. For example, siblings may band together and strategize to persuade parents to buy them their own television for their playroom so they can watch the

programs they want. The results of past alliances can obligate family members to believe that they must support another to repay a debt. For example, a child might think, “Leon helped me convince Dad to buy me a new bike. Now I ought to help him argue with Dad to get his own car.”

Although young children exercise some power, they usually develop more independent power as they grow older and begin to demand and handle more power within the family structure. A 6-year-old may fight for a new toy, whereas a 16-year-old may fight for later curfews and other privileges that increase independence. Many children gain expert power through their specialized skills. When a mother’s younger child wants to play Wii, for instance, she might ask his older brother to set it up because she does not have those skills.

Stepfamilies often contend with issues of power and authority in relation to children.[34] Stepparents often find themselves receiving contradictory messages from children wanting their input and direction but resenting and rejecting it at the same time. One of your textbook authors, Dawn O. Braithwaite, and her colleagues learned how children wield power in stepfamilies as they talked with them in focus groups.[35] The young adults talked openly about taking advantage of a co-parent who did not communicate directly nor had a lot of conflict. Children gained a lot of power in those families and were able to persuade parents that they had different rules in the other house concerning issues such as curfew, bedtimes, or chores. In fact, the stepchildren reported that they dreaded the times their parents would cooperate and find out the truth.

Single-parent families display unique power alliances due to the presence of only one adult. A child with a solo parent negotiates directly with the adult for immediate answers and wields direct personal power. However, the same child cannot form a parent–child alliance to try to change a decision the way a child can in a two-parent family, unless the child creates an alliance with a grandparent, aunt, or uncle.

As families change and move through the life cycle, the original power relationships undergo significant modification as the family network increases, fragments, or solidifies. In addition to developmental issues,

other forces affect changes in power, from inflation and environmental factors to changing cultural norms. For example, communication scholars Jeffrey Child and David Westermann studied how parents and young adults negotiated parental Facebook friend requests.[36] Although children may hesitate to grant this kind of access to their parents, the researchers believed that the perceived power differential between parents and children made it hard for children to refuse the request. In other situations, especially when a family faces a serious stress such as the death or serious illness of a parent or partner, the other adult may assume greater power or establish new ties with a child that involve sharing power differently.

As you can see from our discussion of power thus far, there are a variety of factors that influence how power is developed, negotiated, and enacted within different types of family relationships. With this in mind, let's briefly discuss how specific communication behaviors embody power before we turn our attention to influence strategies in family systems.

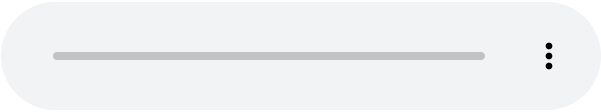
Communication and Power

Certain family communicative acts may be used to address power issues. Because of the nature of transactional communication, these communicative acts address power only when met with a response that engages them.

To illustrate this principle, confirming, disconfirming, and rejecting messages convey power when family members attempt to separate and connect in their relationships. **Confirming messages**, or messages that acknowledge and validate the feelings and perspective of the receiver, may be used to gain power when one tries to get another to identify with them, or when one tries to give rewards in order to gain power. The careful, non-judgmental listener may wittingly or unwittingly gain power. The "silent treatment," however, represents a frequently used **disconfirming message**, which refers to any sort of message that rejects, invalidates, or disrespects the feelings and perspective of the receiver. One family member can put another in a lower power position with the punishment strategy of disconfirmation. "I'll ignore him; he'll come around" represents such an

effort. On the other hand, disconfirming a power message from someone else may serve as an effective method of avoiding a power struggle. The child who pretends not to hear “clean up your room” messages effectively deflects parental power, at least for a while. As one type of disconfirming message, rejecting messages tie directly to punishment messages and are often used as control tactics in family power plays. “I hate you” or “I don’t care what you say” may effectively halt control attempts. More often than not, individuals will avoid argumentative situations when they sense they are being berated and stressed.[37]

Self-disclosure serves as a major means of gaining intimacy within a relationship, but it is not without risks. For instance, when a parent discloses negative relational information (or vents) about the other parent to a child, or when a child vents about one parent to the other parent, the family member who receives the disclosure is likely to feel caught or torn between the disclosing family member and the target of the disclosure.[38] Communication privacy management theory, which we discussed in Chapter 3, helps us understand that disclosure and privacy can be used as power strategies when one party attempts to control the other through revealing or concealing information.[39] For example, when a self-disclosed affair is thrown back at a spouse during a fight (“Well, you had an affair, so how can you talk?”), the accused person may lose power. Even having to defend an accusation regardless of whether it is true or not can result in a loss of power.



▶ Scripts

As you can see, the development and communication of power in family relationships is complex. As family members draw upon different bases of power, they use a variety of verbal and nonverbal messages to assert control and negotiate their interests in the day-to-day affairs of the family. Of course, not all power moves are as overt as disconfirming and rejecting messages. Let’s take a look at how family members rely on more subtle

power moves, or covert influence strategies, as they seek to accomplish everyday goals.

PHOTO 9.1 Children engage in power struggles at very young ages.

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BOX 9.2 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What types of resources did your parents use when exercising power in the family? What types of resources did you and your siblings use (if you have siblings)? Were some resources more effective than others when attempting to persuade other family members?

2. How was power developed, negotiated, and communicated among different members of your family?
3. What similarities and differences did you see in how power was expressed between your parents versus your parents and children in your family?

INFLUENCE STRATEGIES IN FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Influence occurs when family members use their power to try to change or modify each other's behavior or beliefs. Family influence involves interpersonal persuasion; it is an intentional attempt to change the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of other family members who have some measure of choice about how to respond.[40] Influence in family communication is ever present. Think about your last interaction with a family member and how influence was involved. Were you trying to persuade your father that you indeed understood his position on a given topic and knew what you were talking about? Were you trying to influence a sibling to loan you some money? Did one of your parents try to persuade you to join the family for a reunion over a holiday weekend? Were you involved in a debate over an issue, trying to influence a sibling to change their opinion? Any parent will tell you of countless attempts to influence a child, whether it is trying to get a teenaged son to clean his room or to convince a toddler to eat her dinner. Looking back at the second case we used to open this chapter, Robert was considering a variety of influence strategies he might use to make sure his wife and children enjoyed their visit with his parents and grandparents without being drawn into their larger family feud.

Influence is a fundamental part of everyday interactions for all family members. In fact, most communication scholars believe that all communicative events can be examined for persuasive qualities,[41] as we always have influence goals when we interact with others.[42] Whereas **goals**

are desired end states we want to attain or maintain, **interaction goals** refer to the desired end states that require communication and coordination with others to achieve.[43] Sometimes our goals are explicitly persuasive (e.g., trying to persuade an elderly parent to stop driving), but in reality, all communication involves influence. In what we do and say, we are hoping to influence others to see us as knowing what we are talking about, as caring and worthy of love. Before we discuss different types of influence strategies that family members use, different factors that affect who uses which strategies, and which strategies seem to be most effective in producing desired change, let's take a look at Dr. Steven R. Wilson's "Family Portrait" and consider how his family experiences shaped his research on power and influence in military families.

BOX 9.3 FAMILY PORTRAIT: DR. STEVEN R. WILSON, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

Dr. Wilson's website: https://www.usf.edu/arts-sciences/departments/communication/people/faculty/steven-wilson.aspx

What drew you to study family communication?

Family relationships typically are enduring and are both frustrating and rewarding! Families can be stressful and offer key sources of support. Watching how families interact can tell us a great deal about their relationships that are constantly being created through communication.

What are your main areas of family scholarship?

My early research focused on parenting and healthy child development to identify families with unhealthy power dynamics who might benefit from intervention. I currently study how military families navigate having a service member return home after deploying abroad, including how military spouses and parents talk with service members or veterans about behavioral healthcare when needed. This has led to an interest in resilience, or how families communicatively create "new normal" after disruption.

How has your own family influenced what you teach and study?

As a blended family, my family illustrates the diverse nature of family relationships. When my spouse and I married 30 years ago, I suddenly became a (step)parent to four school-aged children and a fifth stepdaughter who was an infant, and within a year a sixth biological daughter. I had never been a parent before. My stepson also served 14 years in the United States Army and Army Reserves, which led to my interest in military families.

How can family communication students use your research in their own family life?

First, family relationships are interdependent and the way we communicate plays an important role in creating those relationships. When frustrated, ask how your own communication might be contributing to a dysfunctional pattern. Second, it's normal to experience communication tensions in family relationships. Certain conversations are inherently challenging. We can analyze what might be better or worse to say in such situations, but there's nothing

"wrong" with us or our families when we experience difficulties – they are difficult and that's okay.

Types of Influence Strategies

Influencing other family members requires using interpersonal compliance-seeking messages targeted at getting someone to alter their behavior or opinions.[44] Family members have goals that they wish to achieve and develop plans to help them achieve their goals.[45] For example, you may have a goal of helping your recently widowed grandmother to feel less lonely. You may seek to achieve this goal by developing a plan for you and your cousins to visit her on different weekends over the next three months.

Influence strategies may be characterized as direct or indirect and as unilateral or bilateral.[46] *Direct* influence strategies include bargaining, reasoning, and asking; *indirect* influence strategies include hinting and withdrawal. Bargaining is an example of a *bilateral* influence strategy or interactive strategy, whereas hinting and withdrawal are examples of *unilateral* strategies. To help you further understand the subtle distinctions that can be made among different types of influence strategies, communication scholars have identified 11 types of strategies that family members may use to influence others in their everyday interactions:[47]

1. *Direct requests*: Asking for what is desired.
2. *Bargaining*: Offering to do something in exchange for what is desired.
3. *Aversive stimulation*: Behaving in a negative manner (e.g., complain, cry) to achieve what is desired.
4. *Ingratiation*: Engaging in positive behaviors to achieve what is desired.
5. *Hinting*: Communicating indirectly to achieve what is desired.
6. *Moral appeal*: Suggesting what good or moral persons should do to achieve what is desired.

7. *Manipulation*: Communicating in ways that elicit negative emotions (e.g., guilt, shame) to achieve what is desired.
8. *Withdrawal*: Silence, avoiding, leaving, or other behaviors designed to elicit the desired behavior.
9. *Deception*: Exaggeration or lies designed to achieve what is desired.
10. *Distributive communication*: Power messages (e.g., bully, antagonize) designed to achieve what is desired no matter what it takes.
11. *Threats*: Attempt to intimidate the other via threats that one may or may not intend to carry out.

Depending on your goals, you may use one or more of these strategies together or in sequence with another family member. Or perhaps an older sister who is trying to get her younger sister to stop taking her clothes without asking may start with hinting ("Has anyone seen my blue shirt? I wanted to wear it tonight") before moving to direct requests of her sister ("Please stop taking my stuff without asking me first") and proceeding to threats ("The next time you take my clothes without asking, I am going to wear your favorite sweater and stretch it out"). In addition, family members will use nonverbal communication as a way to complement or reinforce these verbal strategies. For example, direct eye contact may accompany direct requests or threats; lack of eye contact may accompany manipulation, deception, or withdrawal; and silence may accompany withdrawal.

In one study of dual-career couples, researchers found that both wives and husbands tend to use direct more than indirect strategies and bilateral strategies more than unilateral strategies with their spouses.[48] Bilateral strategies are also used more often by children who perceive that their parents have higher power than those who perceive their parents to have lower power.[49] Likewise, in Mexican-American immigrant families, both women and men used bilateral strategies more frequently than unilateral strategies, although both partners were equally likely to use direct and indirect strategies. The only perceived difference in strategy use between the sexes was that men were more likely than women to buy gifts to influence their partners.[50]

An important principle to keep in mind is that each family member may perceive the influence strategy in different ways depending on their perceptions of the relationship.[51] For example, Lauren uses a very direct strategy with her younger brother, Joel, to try to get him to carry the garbage to the street: “Joel, take out the garbage!” Lauren thinks that this strategy is perfectly appropriate as she perceives that she has more power over Joel because of her age. However, Joel does not perceive Lauren to have more power over him, and thus, he interprets Lauren’s strategy as face threatening and refuses to comply with it. As researchers have demonstrated, adolescents and their parents often do not agree when asked to report the types of influence strategies they use on each other,[52] further reinforcing the idea that senders and receivers perceive influence strategies differently.

Family members may use certain influence strategies to persuade each other in specific contexts – for instance, to modify health behaviors. In situations where spouses are trying to influence each other’s health behaviors, researchers have found that the most frequently used influence strategies included the following:[53]

- *Engaging in health behavior together*. A wife who thinks her husband needs more exercise might ask him to join her on her nightly walk.
- *Discussing the health issue*. A spouse might give a newspaper or magazine article to the other spouse about a health concern or issue and then request they discuss it.
- *Requesting that the partner engage in the health behavior*. One spouse might use a direct strategy and ask the other spouse to quit smoking.
- *Engaging in facilitative behavior*. A partner may provide help to make behavior easier to achieve – for example, a husband may put a multivitamin on his wife’s dinner plate or set aside money each month for her to spend on exercise classes.

As you can see, there are a variety of verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors that family members can use to influence one

another. The more power a person possesses, the more they may succeed with direct messages. Less powerful members may find indirect strategies less threatening and more successful, as one potential danger of using direct messages is that they are more easily misunderstood or ignored. You might hint around or whine about something that you want, but then find that your messages are missed or passed over. On the other hand, you may find that making a direct request is clearer, but much more likely to get a "no" in response, which makes achieving your goals more difficult. Let's take a closer look at some of the factors that may influence how you choose different influence strategies with different members of your family.

Factors Affecting Influence Strategy Use

As you look at the influence strategies explained in the previous section, which ones are you more likely to use with your family members? Most of you would probably answer, "It depends." It depends on the outcome you are trying to attain, on your closeness to and relational history with a particular family member, and on the power bases that you can use in relation to that family member.

Gender is one factor in social influence that family researchers have attended to, especially as they ask whether husbands and wives use influence strategies differently when trying to persuade their spouse. Traditional stereotypes of a wife nagging her husband come to mind for many people.[54] However, in most marriages, the type or frequency of persuasion may be similar as spouses try to influence each other. Cisgender men and women tend to be quite similar in the types of influence strategies they use,[55] although for husbands, marital satisfaction is associated with their use of direct and bilateral influence strategies.[56] When considering persuasive messages about health issues, wives and husbands are equally likely to use similar influence strategies with their spouses.[57]

One challenging area of social influence for women and men surrounds the division of household labor. Despite increases in dual wage-earner homes and women who are primary wage-earners in families, on average

women do more home care than do men.[58] This is an issue over which partners often have conflict and engage in interpersonal persuasion and one that can have very negative effects on partner satisfaction.[59] According to communication scholar Julia Wood, not only do women tend to do more of the work to maintain the home and children, but the work they do requires greater effort and more psychological responsibility (e.g., remembering everyone's schedules and appointments), and is often less gratifying.[60] Indeed, couples face a variety of challenges in the area of household chores and labor. For example, when women attempt to discuss and equalize domestic labor, they may encounter resistance from male partners and negative judgments from others inside and outside the family. At the same time, male partners may become frustrated, as they believe they are making contributions, and that their partner is being unreasonable and asking them to do something they do not care much about.[61] Thus, it is very important to understand family norms and expectations for the division of domestic labor and how couples communicate and make sense of their practices in this area.

Parents and children also engage in influence strategies. The gender of the parent and child and the age of the child make a difference in the types of strategies parents use in an attempt to influence their adolescent children. For example, adolescents were asked to think of a situation in which their parents were trying to get them to help with spring-cleaning. Whereas older adolescent boys identified their fathers as being more likely to use specific influence strategies, such as giving the child permission to stay out late, younger adolescent boys identified their mothers as being more likely to use such strategies.[62] Conversely, children's persuasion skills depend on their ability to engage in perspective-taking or understand how another might think or feel. By age 4, many children can use multiple strategies and personalize them for a specific parent.[63]

Finally, you may have noticed in this section that we know more about influence strategies in marital couples and in parent–child interactions than we do about other relational forms, such as in same-sex couples, single-

parent families, or multiethnic families. For example, how do lesbian and gay couples negotiate the division of domestic labor? Looking back at the case we used to open this chapter, how might Alberto and Michael (re)negotiate their household chores and activities once they become parents? As you can see, we need more research to understand influence strategies in a wider variety of family forms.

PHOTO 9.2 Engaging in healthy behaviors together is a good influence strategy.

Jacek Chabraszewski/Shutterstock

It is important to remember that understanding how to influence another successfully is only one part of the picture. Family members need to know when to accept influence from others as well. Marital researcher John Gottman and his colleagues, who have observed countless couples living temporarily in an apartment in their research lab, talked about the importance of knowing when to consent to the influence of another, a "willingness to yield during an argument in order to 'win' in the

relationship."[64] This can be challenging as conflict involves some form of incompatibility over differing goals, as we will learn more about in Chapter 10, and accepting influence may mean that we will end up going a different direction than we thought. This does not mean giving up and giving in to everything, but recognizing the value of compromise at times when collaboration is no longer feasible. For the sake of the relationship and the family, knowing when to accept influence may be as important as knowing when to use it. Given the importance of such decisions, understanding how decision-making processes work in family systems will only enhance your abilities to influence your family relationships for the better.

BOX 9.4 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What types of verbal influence strategies have you and your family members used most often?
2. Which influence strategies have been the most effective and which ones have been the least effective?
3. In what ways did gender and gender expectations affect the influence strategies used by your parents and other members of your family?

DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES IN FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Questions such as "Who should talk with Mother about our concerns about her driving?" and "Where should we enroll the twins in preschool?" or

“How much should we share with our families about Wei-Lin’s history before we adopt her?” represent concerns that require family decision-making. Family members experiencing role strain or family and work conflicts, as discussed in Chapter 8, often face difficult decisions as they manage these tensions. The number of children to have, whether or not one spouse should accept a promotion that requires relocation, and whether money should be spent for private school tuition represent decisions that family members make. **Decision-making** is the communicative process by which family members make choices, reach judgments, or arrive at solutions. Although we are concerned about decision-making in family systems, and families sometimes do make decisions as a group, in actual practice, most decisions occur within family subgroups (e.g., a husband and wife, adult sibling pairs, a parent and two children, or grandparents and a teenage grandson).

As we stated in the introduction to this chapter, power, influence, and decision-making processes are closely tied together. Decision-making allows differences between individual family members to be aired and addressed. Decisions are not made as much as they emerge from interactions. Following our perspective on family communication introduced in Chapter 2, this means that decisions are co-constructed in communication. Family members use power resources and influence strategies that we discussed earlier in the chapter to try to meet individual and collective goals. In addition, decision-making processes rely on the repertoire of strategies that members have developed to manage conflicting needs and desires, a topic we will discuss further in Chapter 10. In making decisions, family members interact and negotiate their shifting needs for closeness and distance, novelty and predictability, and privacy and openness, the relational dialectics we discussed in Chapter 3. The kind and quality of decisions that family members make affect how family roles, rules, or themes are enacted. Today’s families struggle to find time to make careful decisions. The pressure on single parents and dual-employed couples or partners with children to set aside time to engage in careful and thoughtful decision-making requires prioritizing among competing

demands. The more complex the family system, the more important and potentially complex and challenging the decision patterns become.

In fact, decision-making varies greatly among families because each family holds and negotiates their values, dreams, or resources differently. Unlike a small group that comes together to accomplish a particular task, a family has a history of continuous interaction among and between a set of interdependent individuals, and a future that will be impacted by decisions made today. Families tend to remain together even when members disagree. Even if the decision-making process results in turmoil, the family continues, although sometimes as a factional and unhappy one. This is not true of outside groups that often disband when disagreement or a lack of shared values and goals becomes too much for them. As family relationships are both involuntary and lengthy, members may use negative messages that ironically function to maintain the family system while reinforcing the separate identities of members, rather than focus on communicating ways that bring the family together.[65]

Family decisions can be either instrumental or affective. Instrumental (or task) decisions require problem-solving about practical or functional issues, such as getting a job to pay the family bills or providing transportation. Dual-career couples likely engage in instrumental decision-making as they sit down to map out the week's various activities for the children and their own work and travel schedules. Instrumental decisions may also include those outside the family, such as a babysitter or relative who will keep the children after school. Affective decisions relate to decisions made about family values or relationships, and often rely heavily on emotions or feelings. Clearly, many decisions involve affective and pragmatic arguments. For example, when parents and mental health professionals meet to discuss a child with social emotional disturbance, and the family and professional team hold planning meetings, emotional and research-based arguments arise.[66]

PHOTO 9.3 Joint decision-making reflects shared family power.

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The location of a family along the adaptability continuum (cohesion to flexibility) discussed in Chapter 2 affects its decision-making behavior. Highly enmeshed, rigid families may pressure members to reach predictable and low-risk decisions, whereas disengaged families may have trouble sharing enough information to make reasonable decisions. The length of time together also influences decision-making. Over the years, partners or families tend to develop highly predictable decision-making styles. Understanding family decision-making involves examining (a) types of decision-making processes, (b) phases in decision-making, and (c) factors that influence decision-making. Let's briefly examine each one before concluding this chapter with a discussion of communication skills that enhance family decision-making.

Types of Decision-Making Processes

Each family has its own way of reaching decisions on issues. Decisions can be reached through the use of (a) consensus, (b) accommodation, and (c) de facto decisions, each of which involves different degrees of acceptance and commitment.

Consensus

As the most democratic decision-making process, **consensus** is a type of decision-making process that occurs when family members continue the discussion until agreement is reached. Because the desired goal is a solution acceptable to all involved, this may require compromise and flexibility. Each family member has a part in the decision and a chance for influence, making it more likely they will share the responsibility for carrying it out. Major purchases, money issues, and vacations are common topics for consensus discussions.

Accommodation

A second type of decision-making process is **accommodation**, which occurs when some family members consent to a decision not because they totally agree but because they believe that further discussion will be unproductive. Consent may be given with a smile or with regret. The accommodation decision requires a great deal of trading because no one really achieves what they desire. For example, you may want to go to a church picnic while someone else wants to play in three ball games that weekend. This type of decision-making occurs when families feel pressure to maintain high levels of cohesiveness and when individual members feel they must “go along.”

Sometimes family members line up on opposite sides of an issue and vote. The minority views held by losing family members might have genuine merit, but the losers accept majority rule rather than cause trouble. In accommodation, decisions may favor a dominant member, and less aggressive family members may develop a pattern of submitting to their

wishes. Accommodative decision-making encourages distance and can also enforce negative family themes and images while implementing stereotyped thinking on biosocial issues, especially in cases of male dominance. As we discussed earlier, couples and families need to understand and accept mutual influence in families so that no one member will be able to have their own way or meet their own goals at the expense of others.[67]

De Facto Decisions

The third type of decision-making process happens when the discussion reaches an impasse and one member acts in the absence of a clear-cut decision. This is a **de facto decision** – one made without direct family approval but nevertheless made to keep the family functioning. A fight over which video game system to buy while on sale may be continued until the sale nears an end and Mom buys one. For smaller, less important decisions like this, de facto decisions may be sufficient. We can quickly see the risks in de facto decisions on larger, more important issues, as they really are not family decisions at all. On more important issues, de facto decisions can become overt, and potentially destructive, expressions of power that contribute to controlling or toxic family relationships. Although an individual family member or subgroup might be able to explain or even justify their actions, commitment to the decision and family satisfaction often suffer when decision-making is not shared among all who are involved. Indeed, de facto decisions encourage family members to complain about the result because they played either no part or a passive part in the decision. The family "decided" not to make a decision, and the family member who acts in the vacuum of that decision may have to endure complaints or a lack of enthusiasm from those who have to accept the decision.

Phases in Decision-Making

Most family decision-making passes through a series of phases to reach satisfactory or unsatisfactory decisions. A valuable way to consider phases is to use the family problem-solving loop developed by family scholars Dianne Kieren, Thomas Maguire, and Nancy Hurlbut (see Figure 9.2).[68] The loop illustrates the phases of decision-making developed in the somewhat circular path families take when they make decisions. It also provides for shortened loops when decision-making falters. It analyzes the process using eight steps that decisions proceed through in solving problems. Remember that we are presenting this as a general model of decision-making. You can certainly see how families making decisions in their everyday lives may not follow this model precisely in this order or follow all of the steps each time.

Each of the model's eight steps marks or identifies the beginning and ending of different patterns of interaction in problem-solving. Note that each of the eight steps that develop the loop can be condensed into four phases based on the similarity of activity that family members perform. Phase 1 includes steps 1, 2, and 3 (i.e., identification of the problem, formulating a goal, and assessing resources) and is labeled *identification/clarification*. Phase 2, called *alternatives*, covers steps 4 and 5 (i.e., generation of alternatives and assessing their value). Phase 3, designated as *consensus-building*, includes step 6 (i.e., selecting the best option) and involves attempts that individual family members make to gain support for a solution. Phase 4, or the *decision* phase, covers steps 7 and 8 (i.e., accepting a decision, acting on it, and evaluating it as an outcome).

Decisions are never as simple as they appear. In examining the four phases of family decision-making, realize that the process may be short-circuited at any point by a family member or subsystem alliance that does not agree with certain choices. A family may reach a decision by skipping some steps. It may be difficult to identify which phases are being used in problem-solving because family members are doing other things simultaneously and discussing their options intermittently. Some families tend not to be rational or to follow steps in problem-solving. Once problem-solving patterns are learned, either good or bad, they are resistant to change.

Likewise, a stepwise approach to decision-making does not just happen naturally in families. Some families become bogged down and never get beyond the first or second phase. Other families may make a tentative decision but continue to rethink the decision. Thus, in order to understand the complexity of the process, we need to examine more closely factors that affect family decision-making processes.

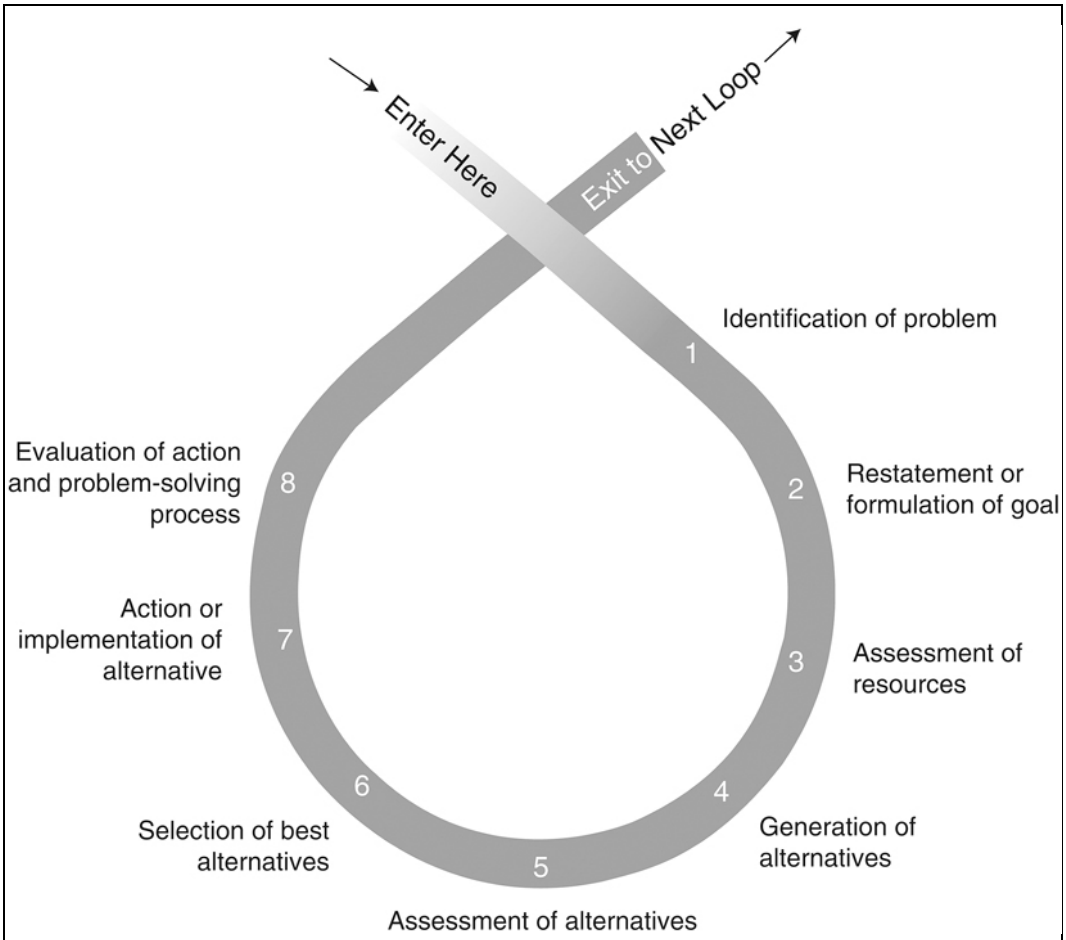

FIGURE 9.2 The family problem-solving loop.

Note. Adapted from McDonald, G. W. (1980). Family power: The assessment of a decade of theory and research, 1970–1979. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 42*(4), 841–852.

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Factors Affecting Decision-Making

The decision-making process is affected by multiple factors. In this section, we will discuss how the following affect decision-making: (a) children, (b) the role of individual involvement and resources, and (c) outside influences.

The Role of Children and Adolescents

Since family of origin experiences affect all areas of your life, your decision-making experiences as a child affect your approach to adult decision-making in ways that you may or may not be aware of. In addition, your own children may affect your family's decision-making processes. In certain circumstances, children share the leadership in decision-making, especially when a child feels support from other members. For instance, researchers have demonstrated that children ages 9 to 12 are influential in family decision-making about choosing a restaurant,[69] and we can see their influence in other areas as well.

Emotions and moods of either parents or adolescents can affect decision-making, leading some scholars to suggest that problem-solving should be postponed until participants' moods are positive or neutral.[70] Children often respond best to positive emotional patterns of communication and perform less well when parents express negative emotions. Although negative feelings need to come out in decision-making, the way they are expressed and interpreted will affect decision-making outcomes. The "Let it all hang out" philosophy hinders family problem-solving. When too many negative feelings surface during the decision-making process, the focus often shifts from problem-solving to personalities.

Parents who actively engage their children in daily decisions play a prominent role in their adolescents' decision-making behaviors. In one study of family decision-making with 76 middle-class African American adolescents and their mothers, researchers found that mothers' involvement in decision-making was consistently higher for conventional decisions (e.g., chores, manners) and prudential decisions (e.g., smoking cigarettes,

drinking alcohol) than for other types of decisions.[71] Adolescents were more involved in personal decisions (e.g., what time to get up, what clothes to wear) than they were in other types of decisions. In viewing decisions about friends, dating, and social activities, for instance, the average adolescent and mother reported that these decisions were jointly made, although adolescents became more involved in those decisions as they aged. As a result, the researchers stressed the importance of parents being involved in adolescents' decision-making.

One type of family decision that children often influence is purchase decisions. Although children ages 8 to 11 may not perceive themselves as having any right to make family purchase decisions, they do try to influence them through exhibiting their knowledge about a product, using good behavior, and selecting items that they think their parents would endorse. Marketers attempt to influence children to exert influence on their parents' decisions, sometimes called "pester power."[72] Children's influence over purchasing is particularly influential over technology purchases, as children may have greater expertise and knowledge than their parents. For example, consider the role of teen Internet mavens. These are teenagers who derive a great deal of personal enjoyment from online surfing and who use their virtual market knowledge to shape and influence family decision-making.[73] Teen Internet mavens influence the early stages of the process (such as search and information provision) more than they do the final decision.

As parents and children grow older, decision-making processes can take on different meanings. Elderly parents may require caregiving decisions to be made by their adult children, which can be a difficult situation for families. Discussing preferences for caregiving by both parents and adult children or relevant others may be useful to have taken place earlier rather than later in the aging process. For mothers and adult daughters with close relationships, there may be little need to discuss the issues of future caregiving because mothers believe that daughters already know their preferences or because there is denial about the aging process.[74] Adult children and parents may agree to children keeping close tabs on their aging

parents via texting, regular phone calls, or Zoom sessions that would have seemed intrusive in earlier stages of life.[75]

Individual Investment and Resources

A second factor that influences family decisions is the individual investment and resources of different family members. How many times have you left or avoided a family decision-making session because you did not care about the result? If you do not sense how things affect you, you are not likely to get involved, even though you will probably be affected. A parent's desire and need for a new refrigerator may not be perceived as important to an adolescent. If money or any other shared resource is scarce, decision-making can become a much more competitive process. If each family member can become involved in agenda-setting and has the right to raise issues and objections, however, the decision-making process is more likely to prosper. Researchers have found that agenda-setting power is more closely associated with marital satisfaction than decision-making power.[76] Discussion may be unimportant to some family members but critical to others, as each individual's personal investment in decisions varies over time with different degrees of separateness or connectedness within the family system.

Outside Influences

In addition to the individual investments and resources of family members, a number of outside factors affect how families make decisions. A mother's salary, a sibling's friends, and a child's teacher may all affect how a decision is resolved. Decisions within a family system often represent compromises or adaptations to other societal systems, as schools, corporations, religious organizations, and government systems impinge on families and influence decisions. For example, think of how public health officials might affect family decision-making during a pandemic, such as the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. As families navigate lockdown

procedures or other public health protection measures (e.g., social distancing and masks), the intersection of schoolwork and home life requires other adjustments in family decision-making.

Other decisions forced on a family by an outside agency, such as a court, restrict individual members' choices. A tumultuous divorce or untimely death can greatly alter the decision-making processes in a family. If separating partners cannot reach decisions about money and property, attorneys and judges intervene. If there are children, decisions must be made regarding custody, visitation rights, and financial arrangements. In stepfamilies, for instance, researchers have demonstrated that ex-spouses will often negotiate their own schedules and visitation agreements with the children – that is, until one parent is perceived as violating the implicit agreement and becomes less trustworthy, at which point the other parent is likely to invoke the terms of the divorce decree and move the family back to a formally negotiated visitation schedule.[77]

Similarly, when a family member is seriously ill and has not made known their end-of-life preferences, family decisions can be difficult. Decision-making about issues surrounding health and illness can create major struggles for families as they negotiate the recommendations of medical professionals with their personal and familial health decisions. For example, a family in which the mother is diagnosed with breast cancer may face decisions surrounding the woman's treatment – deciding between a more time-consuming treatment with a slightly better prognosis and a less time-intensive treatment that will allow her to continue in her other responsibilities. Whereas parents of sons diagnosed with fertility-threatening cancer face a decision about sperm banking before cancer treatment begins, parents of daughters diagnosed with a similar cancer may face a decision about fertility-preserving ovarian surgery. Parents may have hours or days to make these decisions while confronting the overwhelming cancer diagnosis. These represent emotionally charged and time-sensitive decisions with high stakes and long-term implications.[78] Today, ongoing debates occur within the medical community regarding the decision-making role of seriously ill children.[79]

Decisions to undergo and complete fertility treatment among married couples may be influenced by couples' desires to make sure that they had done everything possible to have their own biological child. Other families may have to make decisions about work and family balance based on becoming caregivers for their elderly parents.[80] Decisions about caregiving and medical treatments for elderly parents often lead to some of the most difficult decisions that family members must make – namely, end-of-life health decisions. In the following "Family Matters," you will discover how communication scholars are beginning to explore the different types of goals that family members seek to accomplish during their conversations about end-of-life health decisions.

BOX 9.5 FAMILY MATTERS: FAMILY CONVERSATIONS ABOUT END-OF-LIFE HEALTH DECISIONS

Believing that what matters more in family members' end-of-life health decisions is the *quality* more so than the *quantity* of family interaction, communication scholars Allison Scott and John Caughlin recruited 121 older parent/adult child dyads to engage in a series of elicited conversations about end-of-life health choices and report their assessments of the conversations. Specifically, they analyzed how well each member of the dyad attended to the identity goals (e.g., positive and negative face concerns), relational goals, and task goals of their conversational partner. They then examined how each person's attention to different types of goals and to multiple goals at the same time predicted their own and their partner's conversational satisfaction, hopefulness, hurt feelings, and relational distancing (among other outcomes).

Using a statistical model that accounts for the correlations *between* parent and child scores within each conversation, as well as the

correlations of the variables *across* the conversations, Scott and Caughlin found that (a) a person's own conversational satisfaction and their partner's conversational satisfaction were positively predicted by the attention given to positive face and to the relationship during end-of-life conversations; (b) a person's own conversational satisfaction was also positively predicted by the attention given to negative face (i.e., needs for autonomy and individual dignity) during the conversations; (c) a person's attention to the relationship positively predicted the person's and the partner's hopefulness; (d) a person's attention to positive face was negatively associated with the person's report of relational distancing; and (e) a person's attention to the relationship was negatively associated with the person's and the partner's reports of relational distancing. Perhaps most notably, these researchers found that a person's attention to positive face and to multiple goals at the same time negatively predicted the partner's report of hurt feelings. By demonstrating that attention to different identity and relational goals, as well as to multiple goals at the same time, influences how parents and children feel about such difficult conversations, Scott and Caughlin's study provides compelling evidence that the way family members talk about end-of-life issues matters.

For further reading, see Scott, A. M., & Caughlin, J. P. (2014). Enacted goal attention in family conversations about end-of-life health decisions. *Communication Monographs, 81*, 261–284. https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2014.925568

Communication Skills in Decision-Making

As the "Family Matters" helps illustrate, communication skills are essential to effective and satisfying family decisions. In one way or another, each family member becomes involved in one or more critical decisions affecting one or more other members. The more prepared family members are to

engage in thoughtful and well-reasoned decision-making, the more effective the process will be. In this way, decision-making involves a variety of communication skills that we discuss in various chapters across this book. Effective and competent communication forms the basis for responsible family problem-solving and decision-making. Specifically, family members enact competent problem-solving and decision-making skills when they (a) are open to allowing different family members to speak out; (b) avoid negative messages, either verbal or nonverbal, that convey hostility; (c) seek more than one option as a solution; and (d) communicate in clear, positive remarks that are focused on the problem.[81] Not only are these four behaviors related to the phases of problem-solving and styles of decision-making that we discussed earlier in this chapter, but how adults in families model these communication practices can positively or negatively affect the development of problem-solving skills in their children.[82]

Many families have difficulty with disagreements when attempting to manage or resolve problems, especially when hostile messages are sent and received. As we will discuss further in Chapter 10, disagreement and conflict are normal family processes. Disagreements serve as a functional part of the decision-making process, particularly when both partners use positive communication strategies to express their differences.[83] They may acknowledge the validity of another's ideas, indicate a willingness to incorporate part of another's solution, or praise the other's past contributions. In the "give and take" of exchanges over a decision, family members establish trust and a sense of fairness and equality. Disagreeing allows for minority alliances in a family to have input and function as a source for ideas to include in important decisions.

With these ideas in mind, the following principles may help guide you and your family members in your decision-making: (a) create a sense of justice by treating family members equally, regardless of sex or power resources; (b) create a sense of autonomy by respecting each family member's rights to free choices in order to carry out actions that enhance their life; (c) create a sense of caring by helping other family members achieve their goals; (d) create an awareness of which decisions lead to

actions and behaviors that harm family members or place them at risk; and (e) create a sense of loyalty by keeping promises and carrying out decisions that have been mutually agreed upon. These principles should enhance the self-concepts of each family member and aid family practices of shared power and effective communication.

BOX 9.6 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. Think back to an important decision that you and your family members had to make. Using the family problem-solving loop, how well did you and your family members address each phase of the problem-solving loop?
2. Were there any phases that your family skipped? If so, how did it affect the ultimate outcome or decision that your family made, if at all?
3. Under what types of family circumstances might you use consensus to make decisions as a family? When might you use accommodation or make de facto decisions instead?

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we looked at how individuals develop and communicate power in their family relationships and discussed different influence strategies and decision-making processes. After identifying five power bases, we briefly reviewed how power is used in family interactions and discussed some of the outcomes of power use in family systems. We then

summarized influence strategies that family members may use to persuade others to accomplish their goals. We identified several factors that shape the kinds of influence strategies family members use, including context, gender, age, family norms and expectations, and personality traits. Finally, we presented three broad types of decision-making processes: consensus, accommodation, and de facto decisions. We reviewed eight phases to the family problem-solving loop and concluded this chapter with a discussion of communication skills that enhance family decision-making and problem-solving processes. Family members need to engage in effective and appropriate communication and decision-making practices that help them manage their differences and respond to the relational and environmental challenges that threaten healthy family functioning.

Key Words

Accommodation
Affective resources
Cognitive resources
Confirming message
Consensus
De facto decision
Decision-making
Disconfirming message
Economic resources
Goals
Influence
Interaction goals
Normative resources
Personal resources
Power
Power outcomes
Power processes

FLASHCARDS

which occurs when some family members consent to a decision not because they totally agree but because they believe that further discussion will be unproductive

reflect involvement, commitment, nurturing, and the power to give or withhold affection.

refer to perceptions of power that family members have to influence their own and others' actions and to affect others

or messages that acknowledge and validate the feelings and perspective of the receiver, may be used to gain power when one tries to get another to identify with them, or when one tries to give rewards in order to gain power

is a type of decision-making process that occurs when family members continue the discussion until agreement is reached

one made without direct family approval but nevertheless made to keep the family functioning

is the communicative process by which family members make choices, reach judgments, or arrive at solutions

which refers to any sort of message that rejects, invalidates, or disrespects the feelings and perspective of the receiver

refer to the monetary control exerted by family members as persons designated to make financial decisions.

are desired end states we want to attain or maintain

occurs when family members use their power to try to change or modify each other's behavior or beliefs

refer to the desired end states that require communication and coordination with others to achieve

refer to the family's values and to the cultural or societal expectations of where authority lies

refer to a family member's individual characteristics that afford certain kinds of power, such as personality, physical appearance, and role competence

can be defined as "the ability (potential or actual) of an individual to change the behavior of other family members.

which refer more generally to who makes decisions and is able to influence others in the family

refer to how power is used in family interactions more generally, as well as to how power is used in family communication practices that influence family discussions, arguments, and decision-making, specifically

consist of whatever is perceived as rewarding to an individual or a relationship; they can include anything that one partner makes available to the other to satisfy needs or attain goals

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CHAPTER 10

Communication and Family Conflict

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BOX 10.1

How is family conflict a communication process? How do family members manage interpersonal conflict well? What stages do families go through when managing ongoing and repetitive conflict? And how might family members improve their conflict management skills by using constructive communication behaviors and avoiding destructive ones? In this chapter, we explore family conflict by considering the various management styles, conflict patterns, and destructive and constructive behaviors that comprise it. After reading this chapter, you will be able to

1. Define *interpersonal conflict* and explain how it is a communication process.
2. Identify and briefly describe five conflict management styles using two dimensions of assertiveness and cooperativeness.

3. Analyze repetitive family conflicts using the six stages of ongoing family conflict.
4. Explain family conflict as a process involving patterns and rules.
5. Compare and contrast covert and overt forms of destructive conflict behavior, as well as distinguish destructive from constructive conflict behavior.

COMPANIONS IN CONFLICT

Throughout her life, Callie has always had close male friends, both straight and gay. She related well to her husband Peter's friends, to men at her law firm, and to her sons' friends. She always felt comfortable talking with guys, and they seemed comfortable confiding in her and seeking her advice about dating, careers, and many other topics. Whereas Callie always had a large group of female and male friends, Peter was much more of an introvert, although she appreciated his calmness and steadiness. He always teased her about her guy friends, such as Jim whom he called Callie's "work husband."

Peter retired three years ago, and Callie retired just this last spring. Callie always heard it was important not just to retire from something, but also to something. She immediately joined the planning committee for the city marathon and the board of the local food bank. However, Peter mostly stays home, is more quiet than usual, and shares few of her interests. Peter and Callie, who argued very little in their marriage, now seem to bicker over small issues they would not have noticed while they were both working.

Recently, Callie has been working on planning the city marathon with Kirby, a widower. They have done some runs together as they are very evenly matched. Callie and Kirby regularly text and chat online, and they have sat and talked after their meetings. Callie really enjoys talking with Kirby and both have shared stories about their lives, their hopes, and their

frustrations. Callie tells Kirby things she would have shared with Peter in the past. Although in Callie's mind their relationship has been completely innocent, she feels a bit guilty at the same time. She has not hidden the friendship from Peter but does not go out of her way to talk about it either. Peter has started commenting when Kirby calls and texts or when Callie spends a lot of time online. Three nights ago, when Callie came home from a marathon committee meeting, Peter asked her if she was having an affair with Kirby. She was shocked! Peter demanded that she drop off the committee and stop having contact with Kirby. They had a big fight, have barely spoken since that evening, and now Callie only texts or calls Kirby when Peter is not around.

TIMING IS (NOT) EVERYTHING

Chung Ha and Marina Revello met during their sophomore year in college as dorm counselors. They became a couple during their junior year, graduated, attended the same law school, graduated again, and then found positions in the same city. To the joy of their families, Chung and Marina announced their engagement last Fourth of July, and their wedding date as July 4th of the following year. Marina's older brother, Anthony, took a different path. He dated seriously and serially throughout college and during his years in the U.S. Navy, but he always ended these relationships. Early last fall, he fell madly in love with Michelle, a fellow officer, and proposed to her on New Year's Eve. They quickly set a wedding date of June 7th, approximately four weeks before Marina's wedding. Family fireworks followed!

Currently, the Revello family is in turmoil. Marina has claimed that she "owns" this year for her wedding and that Anthony and Michelle need to wait a year to marry. She is furious at the idea that they planned to upstage her wedding by marrying first, especially because they only met last fall. Michelle argues that no one can "own a year" for a wedding and, given her age of 31, she wants to marry and start a family as soon as possible. In

addition, Michelle will be at sea for months after the wedding so she could not have a wedding between August and November. Chung and Anthony, surprised and overwhelmed by the tensions, are struggling to remain in the background, although each tries to support his future wife. The in-laws each support their daughters but worry about the long-term fallout between the couples. The Revello family dreads the negative impact that the present conflict may have on their tight-knit family unit.

As both of these cases illustrate, conflicts in family systems stem from multiple issues and are handled in a variety of ways with different degrees of success. Conflict in families is not necessarily bad; in fact, conflict is both natural and inevitable, and it can strengthen family relationships if managed in a healthy and competent manner. The communication process plays a central role as families navigate conflict and negotiate their incompatible goals in interaction.[1] A family's perceptions, themes, metaphors, and images of conflict influence the amount and type of conflict that develops and how individual members respond to and manage disagreements. Looking back at the two case studies we used to open the chapter, for example, how might Callie's perceptions of Peter's typical behavior and retirement choices influence her initial reactions to his anger over Kirby's text messaging? In the second case, if Marina views conflict as a "war," might she perceive the need to recruit other family members into battle and to win at any cost? If Michelle views conflict as inevitable but unpredictable, she may think she is powerless when conflict occurs. Although both of these examples depict negative perceptions of conflict, you may be able to think of some more positive ways of viewing conflict as well. Clearly, understanding conflict is important to the quality of family relationships and the emotional and physical health of family members.[2]

It is important to understand that the mere absence of conflict does not mean that a family functions well. In fact, conflict avoidance can often lead to negative long-term consequences.[3] One strong parent or sibling can suppress or avoid conflicts to make the family system appear to be

balanced, when that is not the case. Over time, such suppression can have negative effects on the mental and emotional well-being of family members. Dysfunctional families may get stuck in a powerful conflict cycle that devastates one or more family members. Although both functional and dysfunctional families experience conflict, functional families engage in and communicate about conflict in more constructive and positive ways.[4] In other words, functional family members engage in conflict in ways that make their differences more tolerable, their incompatibilities more manageable, and their relationships more sustainable. The ways in which family members agree are important, and the more agreement there is among members, the less likely it is that disastrous conflict will result. At the same time, the ways in which family members disagree are equally important. Some battle openly, whereas others covertly harm each other. What is accepted as rational in one family may be perceived as irrational in another.[5] All members of a family system contribute to the regulation of tensions created by conflict and make choices about how they interact in situations involving conflict. For example, one young adult reported that when she and a sibling would argue as kids, her mother would make them sing their arguments to each other, which quickly turned the arguments into peals of laughter. Thus, it is less important to strive for conflict-free relationships and families and more important to understand the nature of conflict and communicate and manage it well.

By exploring the process of conflict and how it typically develops in families, and by increasing your awareness and knowledge of competent communication behaviors to use when managing conflict, you can enhance your understanding of conflict and strengthen your family relationships through effective conflict management. To help you accomplish these goals, in this chapter, we first examine family conflict as a communication process. After reviewing the stages of ongoing family conflict, we then identify some of the patterns of family conflict and rules for conflict that characterize different types of marital and family systems. Finally, we close this chapter with a comparison of destructive and constructive conflict behaviors in family relationships.

FAMILY CONFLICT IS A COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Family members who confront their differences are more likely to improve their relationships and experience more joint benefits that increase love and caring. One of the values of conflict is that it may provide opportunities for openness and valuable feedback, leading to personal growth and innovations that enhance family adaptability and cohesiveness. At a fundamental level, the intensity of an interpersonal conflict determines the kinds of messages that are produced, the patterns of confrontation that follow, and the interpretations that individual family members place on the communication cues they receive.[6] With this in mind, let's define *conflict* and then look more closely at how conflict patterns vary across family forms, individual styles of conflict management, and stages of social interaction.

Conflict Defined

It is human nature to notice how others' behavior affects us, and from this perspective conflict has an element of self-orientation to it. One could hardly go through a day and not feel some sort of negative emotions in relation to the other people in our lives. You may become upset when your roommate does not wash the dirty dishes, a sibling forgets your birthday, or your uncle talks incessantly about his own interests. Negative emotions are very real, but from a communication perspective, you do not have an interpersonal conflict until certain conditions are met. Communication scholars define **interpersonal conflict** as "an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties, who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals."[7] This definition conveys several important principles about conflict. First, conflict is an expressed struggle, meaning that it is not an interpersonal conflict if all parties are not aware of its existence. You may feel frustrated or angry about something, but if you have not communicated this to your family

members, you experience annoyance, frustration, or negative emotions but not interpersonal conflict. In the beginning case, for instance, Peter may have been frustrated or concerned with Callie's relationship with Kirby, but until that frustration and concern was expressed, there was no interpersonal conflict.

Second, in line with systems thinking, the parties need to be interdependent. You cannot have interpersonal conflict if the outcomes do not affect other members of the system. Third, conflicts involve perceptions. Conflict may arise as the result of a perception, such as individuals' beliefs that the degree of intimacy expected of them either smothers them or requires more of them than they want to provide. Conflict may also develop over a difference in attitudes or values. For instance, as a full-time working mother, Latricia does not enjoy cooking and would prefer to go out with the family to eat pizza than to fix dinner. Her partner values home-cooked meals and believes these are one way a mother shows she cares about her family. Fourth, conflicts concern goals and scarce resources. It is inevitable in family relationships for family members to have different goals at different times. An adolescent's goal may be to establish independence; at the same time a parent wants to become closer. A husband at midlife who has achieved many of his career ambitions may want to spend more quality time with his wife, just as her career is peaking. Indeed, conflict is often about control over scarce resources.[8] A scarce resource could be time, such as the year of a wedding as in the opening vignette about Marina's and Anthony's family, or resources of money, attention, and even physical space. Conflict occurs when one person's behavior or desire blocks the goals of another, resulting in a "showdown" over values and resources, as each family member seeks to satisfy their needs – often at some expense to the other.

The process of conflict is very complex, consisting of both individual and relational dimensions. Thinking back to relational dialectics theory from Chapter 3, family members may use conflicts in a dialectical sense to gain autonomy when they feel trapped and need to reduce connectedness. It is important to understand that not all dialectical contradictions involve

conflict; those that do are referred to as **antagonistic discourses**, where one person advocates for one discourse or perspective and another advocates for an opposing discourse. For example, upon the death of a child, one parent may want to express grief and the other parent may not want to talk about it.[9] Other discourses are **nonantagonistic discourses**; although they reflect dialectical contradictions, nevertheless, they do not lead to interpersonal conflict.[10] Antagonistic contradictions often result from an explicit mismatching of interests and goals of individual family members. Keep in mind, however, that dialectical contradictions generated in conflict are not negative forces, but rather are part of ongoing dynamic interactions between opposite views and needs of family members.

Conflict and Family Systems

Families act as systems, and because of their interdependence, a conflict between any two members of the family will affect other members. As you may recall from Chapter 1, systems thinking focuses on the level of the group or family and not at the level of the individual. Conflict in a family system is best understood by focusing on the interactions between family members.[11] Of the various subsystems in a family, the way in which marital conflict affects children has received the most attention. Specifically, parents' conflicts influence their parenting behaviors, which in turn affect their children by reducing the amount of time, energy, affection, and other resources they might otherwise give to their children. Some scholars have documented a spillover effect from marital to parental subsystems, such that the emotions and tensions that are aroused during negative marital conflict carry over into parent–child interactions.[12] For instance, parents who express high hostility within their marriage also use more harsh discipline with their children and show less sensitivity, support, and love to their children. Other researchers have found that when spouses have conflict one day, the likelihood that they will have tense interactions with their children the next day increases.[13] Even infants have observable reactions to parental conflict.[14]

The effects of family conflict and the way in which parents communicate and manage conflict can have profound effects on children and their relationships with family members and others, particularly as they grow older and develop their own intimate relationships. In one longitudinal study of parents and adolescents, for instance, researchers found that the conflict management styles that parents used with each other were related to the conflict management styles they and their adolescents used two years later.[15] Using a racially diverse sample of families, other scholars have demonstrated that high levels of marital conflict in a family are related to both overt and relational aggression of young adolescents.[16] Parents who use more positive conflict behaviors and less negative conflict behaviors have adolescents who enact similar patterns of conflict behavior with their own romantic partners.[17] Similarly, college students in dating relationships who witnessed higher levels of verbal aggressiveness from their parents are more likely to report higher levels of involvement as instigators and recipients of violence in their own dating relationships than those who did not.[18] This finding was particularly strong for same-sex parent–child dyads, suggesting that the strongest role model of aggressive behavior for a son is his father and for a daughter is her mother. Finally, college students with secure attachment styles in their romantic relationships reported having parents with lower verbal aggressive tendencies.[19]

Although children are often socialized by their parents into particular conflict styles and behaviors, keep in mind that conflict varies across family forms, contexts, and cultures. For example, cohabiting couples that struggle with destructive conflict patterns are more likely to be abusive than dating couples of the same age.[20] Likewise, LGBTQIA+ couples with serious conflicts or in abusive relationships may have less access to social support from others since many remain stigmatized by unsupportive family members. Another type of conflict often arises in gay and lesbian families when they have children from previous marriages, especially in the early years after divorce. This stepfamily form does not have universal acceptance, which may cause conflicts during holiday times and vacations,

visits from the children, or during discussions over which biological parent should have custody. Children in single-parent families and stepfamilies may be exposed to intra-household fighting within their homes, as well as to inter-household conflicts with nonresidential parents. As a result, children of divorced parents may feel caught in the middle between their parents, as in a recent investigation of feeling caught, where one daughter reflected that she felt like a bone caught between two dogs.[21] Children are not the only ones who can feel caught between other family members, however, as parents can also feel caught between a spouse and a child when one or the other discloses negative relational information about the other member of the family triad.[22]

Cultural background influences family members' attitudes toward conflict and how they are socialized to interact when conflicts occur. In some cultures, open struggle is commonplace and comfortable; in other cultures, verbal expression of differences is avoided at all costs. In many Asian families, "saving face" is a priority, and preserving harmony as a social group ranks over an individual's needs to express strong feelings and inner thoughts. In China, for example, children typically view a competitive conflict style as too confrontational and an avoidant conflict style as too passive. Instead, they prefer collaborating, which appears more constructive and face-saving.[23] In contrast, in Iranian families, arguments ensue, and direct communication may stop for days, weeks, or months,[24] such that eventually a mediator may be required to bring about resolution. Latinx families may have a strong culture of familism within which children are expected to show support and obedience to their parents, particularly to their fathers.[25] Despite these cultural trends, however, some scholars contend that individual family characteristics may ultimately account more for differences in conflict styles than culture.[26] Let's take a moment to consider how one family communication scholar's cultural upbringing and ancestry led her to study communication, hardships, and resilience in immigrant families.

BOX 10.2 FAMILY PORTRAIT: DR. JENNIFER KAM, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT SANTA BARBARA

Dr. Kam's website: https://www.comm.ucsb.edu/people/jennifer-kam

What drew you to study family communication?

As an undergraduate, I was required to take a public speaking course. I decided to take another communication course, which happened to be Interpersonal Communication. I loved it! Although I initially went to graduate school to study communication and romantic relationships, my family experiences and concern regarding health and economic inequities in the United States led me to study communication with immigrant families.

What are your main areas of family research?

I study how stressors rooted in social and structural barriers are associated with health and well-being of immigrant youth. I focus on undocumented immigration, interpreting for adult family members under stressful conditions, family separation because of migration, and racial/ethnic discrimination. I seek to identify different forms of family communication that attenuate or unintentionally exacerbate the negative effects of stressors.

How has your own family influenced what you teach and study?

My father and grandparents immigrated to the U.S. from China. I heard family immigration stories about my maternal grandfather coming to the U.S. as a child and being kept for months at a detention center on Angel Island in San Francisco or my father living in China as a young child while my grandmother worked alone in the U.S. until she saved enough money to bring the family over. These stories (and more) motivate me to study how communication can positively or negatively affect the lives of immigrant families.

How can family communication students use your research in their own family life?

My work on communication with immigrant families can give students a deeper appreciation for different family experiences and help students recognize that all families face external and internal hardships at times. My work can offer students examples of the many ways that families, despite extremely challenging circumstances, support one another and co-create resilience.

Now that we have defined conflict and discussed how a systems perspective focuses our attention on conflict in different family forms, contexts, and cultures, let's briefly explore some of the topics of conflict that family members experience before turning our attention to individual styles and stages of conflict management in family systems.

Topics of Conflict

Families experience conflict over many issues. In fact, marital psychologist John Gottman and his colleagues have discovered that, on average, couples have conflict over the same issues 69% of the time.[27] They concluded that,

since many conflicts arose over insolvable problems, counselors and family therapists need to teach couples that they'll never solve most of their problems, but that instead, couples need to establish a dialogue about their problems.

If you have siblings, or have been around siblings, you probably realize that they can quarrel with each other over many issues – who gets the front seat in the car, whose turn it is to take out the trash, who can use the iPad, and which game to play for family game night. More serious issues in families such as adolescent drug use, the perception that one sibling is getting more resources or attention, a spouse's infidelity, or a parent's alcohol addiction also lead to conflict. Although technology has provided more opportunities for family communication, it has simultaneously increased opportunities for family conflict.[28] For example, in one family, conflict ensued between the parents and an adult son over the division and sale of some family property, and this conflict grew to involve other adult siblings and extended family members. E-mails and texts were kept and turned into evidence as legal cases against other family members were developed. The son's wife posted descriptions and photos of family birthday parties on social networking sites so the parents and others could see that the parents were not invited. E-mails and text messages are especially prone to misunderstandings, as less nonverbal information is available to provide clues to the meaning of a message.

Stepfamilies are especially prone to struggles that are unique to this family form.[29] Conflicts over resources, space, privacy, and finances may emerge as members try to develop a new family identity. Divorced co-parents need to negotiate how they will parent, stepparents and stepchildren may have conflict over the stepparent's authority, and stepsiblings may struggle over sharing bedrooms and parents' attention. Not all stepfamily conflict is negative, however, as some stepfamilies adapt and develop ways of handling challenges that may result in discussion and compromise, which in turn can lead to positive change.[30]

In any family form, change may trigger uneasiness and consequent conflict. Adding a new family member, a job loss, the trauma of a divorce,

or the loss of income all influence the family system. Even positive events like inheriting a large sum of money, retirement, or having a baby can lead to disturbances in family equilibrium and conflict as the family struggles to adjust to changes. Whatever the topic, some issues result in deep, seemingly intractable or unsolvable conflicts that reappear over time to create painful and frustrating points of struggle in family relationships.

A Model of Conflict Management Styles

An important principle of conflict management is that individuals often possess different management styles. For example, your mother and brother may exhibit conflict styles that are somewhat similar to each other but different from the one you and your father exhibit. As you grew up, you learned how to manage or survive conflicts; this learning influenced the style of the conflict strategies you tend to use. These conflict styles are patterned behaviors that family members use in conflicts, and we often enact these styles of conflict management without much thought.[31] One conflict style is not necessarily better than another; what is more important is that family members find the right style that works best for the particular situation they are in, and to consider how one family member's style works in tandem with another member's style to manage interpersonal disputes. To help you think about your own approach to conflict, researchers have developed a classic model of conflict management styles (Figure 10.1) that consists of two partially competing goals: concern for others (or cooperativeness) and concern for self (or assertiveness).[32] Essentially, how you manage your interpersonal conflicts with other family members contains elements of both cooperation and assertiveness.

As depicted in Figure 10.1, competition and collaboration are at the top of the model. *Competitiveness* requires high assertiveness with little to no cooperativeness, as your primary focus is on going after what you want. Your concern for self is high; thus, you see conflict as a way to get what you need, regardless of another person's needs or concerns. Competition becomes highly selfish if it is your only relational conflict style. It can mean

"I win, you lose" too often and destroy cohesion within a family. When the situation calls for a competitive approach, however, the challenge can be how to achieve personal goals without taking unfair advantage of other family members.

Collaboration occurs when you show concern for other family members, as well as high concern for self. It often means finding an alternative or a creative solution that satisfies completely the goals of all parties involved in the dispute. Collaborating depends on high trust levels and self-disclosure on the part of all members. Conflicting members must seek a solution that enables all parties to feel they have won without compromising issues vital to individual needs; in essence, it is an "I win, you win" approach.

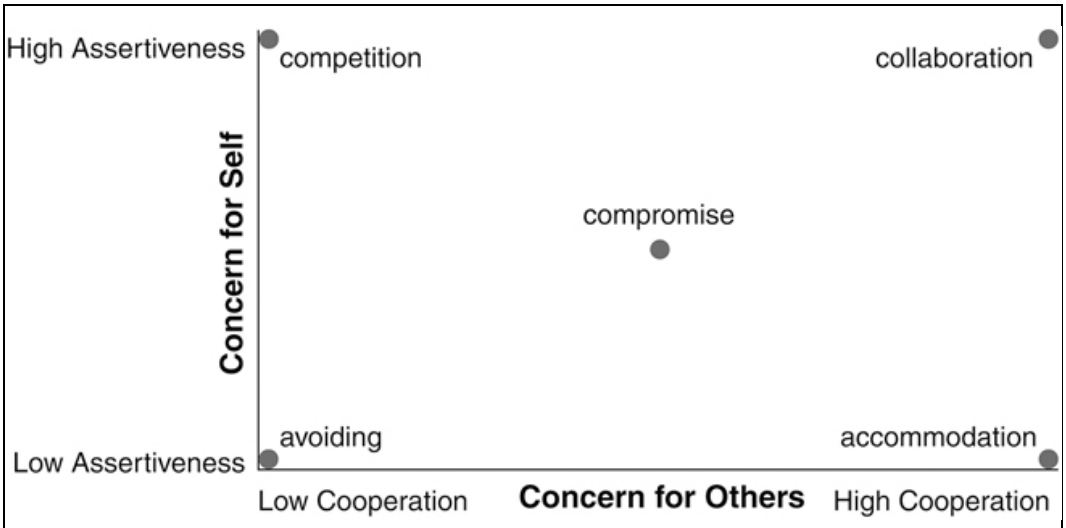

FIGURE 10.1 Conflict styles.

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Compromise represents a solution that partially meets the needs of each member involved in the conflict, but no one's needs fully. In some families, the motto is "Be wise and compromise." Such a family theme supports giving in or giving up some of one's needs. Usually, it implies an equal win and loss for each member. In other words, although compromising is often touted in popular culture as the preferred conflict management style, it

nevertheless involves an “I lose, you lose” approach to conflict, as both parties end up sacrificing part of what they want for the sake of ending the dispute.

At the lower right of the model is *accommodation*, which occurs when you are unassertive but cooperative. It is the opposite of competition because you meet the demands or needs of the other person but deny your own. Whereas a competitive approach can be viewed as “I win, you lose,” an accommodating approach can be viewed as “I lose, you win.”

Finally, *avoiding* implies an unassertive and uncooperative style in which at least one member refuses to engage the issue. This may leave one partner highly frustrated because they cannot involve the other partner in any resolution efforts. Sometimes it is wise to use a “pick your battles” approach; at other times, avoiding is a powerful, passive–aggressive response to conflict. Regardless of whether or not a situation calls for an avoidant approach, like compromising, it too is a “lose, lose” management style, as neither person addresses their concerns nor achieves their goals.

This conflict style model provides a way to understand how one family member’s conflict management style affects another member’s response pattern. By using the combination of assertiveness and cooperativeness to identify different conflict management styles, you can enhance your own understanding of how you and other family members manage interpersonal conflict.

Stages of Ongoing Conflict

In addition to individual conflict styles, understanding how conflict develops over time allows you to unravel some of the complexity of conflict, and position a disagreement or fight within a larger context. Families tend to experience many recurring and unresolved conflicts as certain issues arise, triggered by reoccurring events or circumstances. To help you think more carefully about how family conflict unfolds over time, we have identified six conflict stages that are useful for analyzing the ongoing and repetitive conflict process: (a) a prior conditions stage, (b) a

frustration awareness stage, (c) an active conflict stage, (d) a solution or nonsolution stage, (e) a follow-up stage, and (f) a resolution stage. These are represented in Figure 10.2. As you read through this model, think about a recent conflict in your family and consider whether you can identify all six stages in the dispute. Did each of these stages emerge as a distinct entity or "phase" in the argument, or was it difficult to know when one ended and the next began?

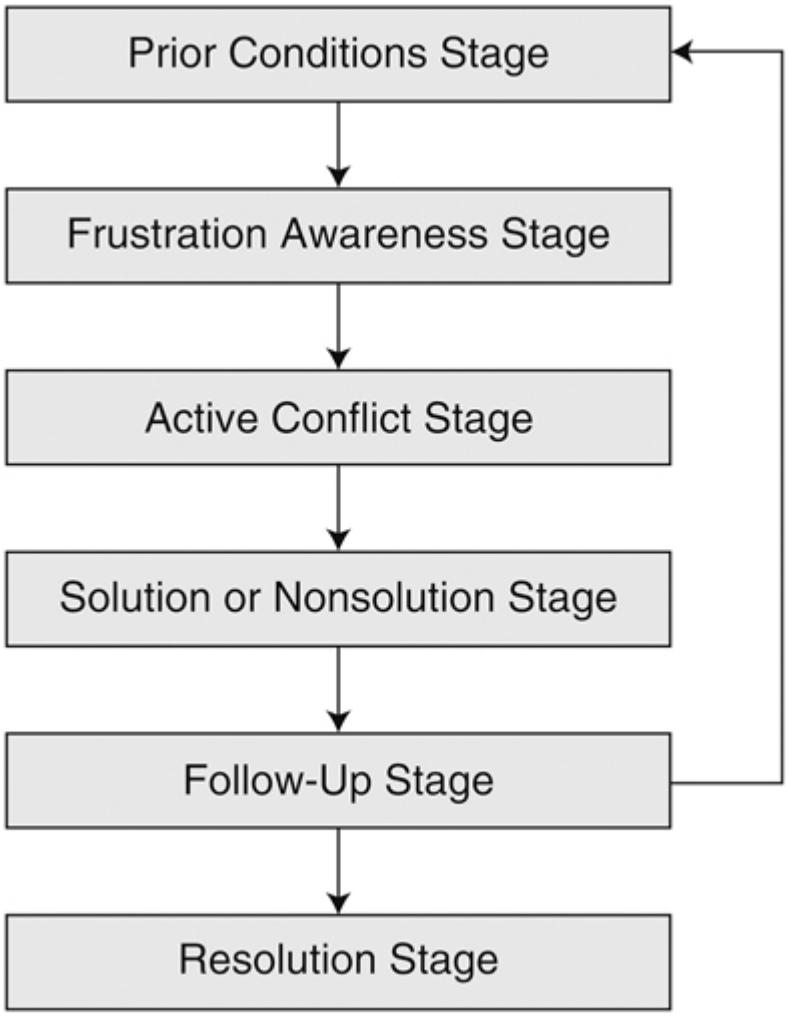

FIGURE 10.2 Stages of ongoing family conflict.

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Prior Conditions Stage

Ongoing conflict does not emerge from a vacuum. It is rooted in the history of the relationship. Prior conditions are present in the absence of active conflict but, under pressure or stress, come into play. Prior conditions that may trigger a clash include ambiguous understandings of each family member's responsibilities and role expectations, ongoing competition over scarce resources such as money or affection, unhealthy dependency of one person on another, and problematic decision-making patterns. Specific circumstances, such as holiday times, income tax time, drunken episodes, or the arrival of in-laws, may all serve as prior conditions. Past experiences set the groundwork for tension arousal. Oftentimes, the stage may be set for family conflict by mindlessness, or going through relational life on autopilot, without paying much attention to the present state of the relationship or the perceptions of others.[33]

Frustration Awareness Stage

In response to sensing a prior condition event, this stage involves one or more family members becoming frustrated because someone or something blocks them from satisfying a need or concern. One or more parties become aware of snappy answers, nonverbal messages in the form of slammed doors, or avoidance of eye contact. In most ongoing repetitive conflicts, it is common for nonverbal cues to appear before verbal ones. As you nonverbally become aware of the conflict, you might think, "He's really getting upset" or "I can feel myself getting tense." Certain code words or phrases also heighten tensions. For example, "You're not going to have another drink (piece of cake, cigarette), are you?" or "Why don't I ever have any clean clothes?"

Inaccurate perceptions can create conflict where none exists because they can trigger tensions. An incipient conflict may end at this point if one person perceives that the negative consequences outweigh the possible advantages. "Backing off" from the issue may end the immediate tension,

but it does not remove the causes or satisfy the needs that provoked it. Sometimes tension ends through self-disclosure when you recognize the potential for conflict: “I’m really just upset about the test tomorrow and I’m taking it out on you,” or “You’re right – I was selfish and I’m sorry.” Also, during this stage, which John Gottman has labeled “agenda-building,”[34] cross-complaining may begin via a series of negative messages that the involved family members are unwilling to stop. **Cross-complaining** involves responding to another person’s complaint or criticism with one of your own while ignoring the other person’s point.

Active Conflict Stage

At this point, the conflict manifests itself in a series of overt verbal and nonverbal messages. This symbolic interchange may resemble a battleground or a calm, pointed discussion, depending on the family’s rules and style of fighting. Whereas yelling may signal that a major fight has begun in some families, in others, it may be considered a common occurrence. Typically, active conflict escalates from initial statements and queries to overt fighting, bargaining, or giving an ultimatum. This may be characterized by a discernible strategy, or game plan, when one or more family members try to maneuver and convince others of the merits of an issue. The longer the conflict continues, the more the participants’ behavior may raise frustrations, encourage active arguing, and increase resistance to change. Distressed couples usually escalate their conflicts by continued cross-complaining, accusations, and blaming. However, healthy couples tend to match positive remarks with positive remarks or balance their negative sentiments with positive remarks. In one study of engaged couples, for example, researchers found that a lack of blaming and the use of complementary control messages that promoted positive affect during discussions about problems was positively associated with the couples’ relational satisfaction.[35]

The ability of each spouse to accurately understand the emotions of the other plays an important role during active conflict. Spouses infer how the

other is feeling during active conflict based on their observations of their spouse, as well as their own feelings and thoughts. The presence of depressive symptoms in either husband or wife during the active conflict stage can make it difficult for the spouse to accurately assess their partner's anger.[36]

Solution or Nonsolution Stage

The active conflict stage evolves into either the temporary solution or the nonsolution stage. The solution may range from creative, constructive, and satisfactory to destructive, nonproductive, and disappointing. The solution may represent a compromise or adjustment of previously held positions. In this stage, how conflict episodes are managed or solved determines the outcome and whether positive or negative results follow in the immediate future. It does not, however, *resolve* the ongoing issue at stake in the cycle of repetitive conflict.

Essentially, within ongoing family conflicts, solutions may be thought of as *conflict management*. For example, partners who struggle continually over the wife's work as an undercover police officer may argue over her inability to stay in touch with her husband while on duty. He becomes upset because he gets frightened when she does not return calls within a few hours, something that happens regularly, and he resents always being the go-to parent for problems at their son's school. The times that she has access to a safe phone or can pick up her son from school provide a short-term solution. But when the next phone call comes and she has to remain in her role, even into overtime hours, he becomes angry once again. So although occasionally a conflict episode can be defused and managed with vacation days or less dangerous assignments, the ongoing conflict process is never resolved. However, if she took a desk job, the conflict would disappear.

Some conflicts move into ongoing nonsolutions, however, as the active conflict stops but nothing is resolved. Family members simply live with the frustrations or angry feelings that surface, as nonsolution brings the conflict

to an impasse. In the opening vignette about Callie and Peter, this couple may enter into the nonsolution stage when each of them just stops talking about their problems, which is likely to reduce their feelings of family cohesion and adaptability.[37] Obviously, communication problems can develop if they have too many conflicts that end with nonsolutions. However, every family lives with some unresolved conflicts because the costs of an acceptable solution outweigh the advantages to one or more family members. In some families, these unresolved conflicts may become major problems that undermine relational quality, but other families may live with irresolvable disputes without experiencing a subsequent decline in relational quality among family members.[38]

Follow-Up Stage

This stage could also be called the aftermath stage. It includes the reactions that follow active conflict and affect future interactions, such as avoidance or conciliation without acceptance. Grudges, hurt feelings, or physical scars may fester until they lead to the beginning stage of another conflict. The house may be filled with long silences, avoidance, or formal politeness. On the other hand, the outcomes may be positive, such as increased intimacy and self-esteem, or honest explorations of family values or concerns. The members may exchange apologies or communicate about the fight. This aftermath stage is linked by a feedback chain to the initial stage because each conflict in a family is stored in the prior conditions "bank." In ongoing, unresolved conflicts, whenever the trigger or the prior conditions reoccur, the entire conflict process is ignited once again. This may go on for years or decades.

Resolution Stage

This stage occurs when a recurring conflict no longer exists; it no longer affects the family. For example, a husband and wife may argue over priorities on bills to be paid. They negotiate and compromise on demands,

and then stick to their agreement. Time and developmental stages of each family member also affect solutions to conflicts. For example, parental conflicts over who will take Wei-Lin to school decrease or disappear after she becomes old enough to walk there by herself; the same will be true of parental conflicts over dating rules and curfews when she becomes a young adult. Conflicts over space and territory among six children competing for three bedrooms no longer require solutions when some have left home.

It is important to remember that in the model (Figure 10.2), participants may "exit" at any stage. A visitor may interrupt the frustration awareness stage and defuse the tension, at least temporarily. One or the other party may disengage from the issue, give in, or shift the focus. Regardless, this model of conflict stages provides a more general description of how ongoing and repetitive family conflicts typically unfold. Now that we have a general sense of how family conflict progresses or changes over time, let's examine how patterns and rules for conflict behavior influence how individual family members process and produce messages during conflict.

BOX 10.3 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What style of conflict management do you typically use with your parents? If you have siblings, what style of conflict management do you typically use with them? What similarities and differences do you see in how you approach conflict management with your parents and sibling(s)?
2. Identify an ongoing family conflict that your family of origin is experiencing (or has experienced). How well do the six stages of ongoing family conflict describe your family's experience with this

unresolved dispute? To what extent can you identify key “markers” of each stage?

FAMILY CONFLICT INVOLVES PATTERNS AND RULES

The conflict process unfolds in unique ways within unique family and relational cultures.[39] In an earlier study of conflict in early marriage, social scientists found that although specific partners make individual contributions to the marital unit, the couple becomes a relational system that forms its own manner of resolving conflict;[40] that is, couples developed their own styles of conflict that were unique to them. Soon after marriage, the marital dyad develops its own fight style, one that often persists throughout the marriage.

Perhaps the most common pattern of conflict that couples engage in is called the **demand/withdraw pattern**, an asymmetrical pattern of behavior in which one partner pressures the other through emotional demands and complaints, while the other retreats through withdrawal, avoidance, and passive inaction.[41] In this pattern, one spouse enacts a complaining or nagging behavior while the other spouse withdraws, trying to avoid conflict. This can happen in a particular conflict episode, but it can also become a pattern of behavior, or a conflict habit, within the relationship. One spouse might nag the other about a chore that needs to be done. The more the spouse nags, the more the other withdraws by ignoring or not answering the complaining spouse. Researchers have shown that the demand/withdraw pattern is typically harmful to marital relationships, as it positively predicts marital dissatisfaction over time,[42] elevated stress levels during conflict,[43] depression,[44] physical abuse,[45] and divorce,[46] as well as mental health issues in young adult children.[47] Although it is more common for wives to assume the demanding role and husbands the withdrawing role, there are instances of husband demand/wife withdraw. Likewise,

researchers have observed the demand/withdraw pattern of conflict in parent–adolescent relationships, with the most common pattern involving a demanding parent and a withdrawn adolescent child.[48]

Although one form of demand/withdraw in marriage (i.e., wife demand/husband withdraw) occurs more frequently than another (i.e., husband demand/wife withdraw), researchers have continued to question whether or not one form is necessarily more damaging than another – that is, until a group of communication scholars conducted a meta-analysis of the demand/withdraw literature and compared the average effects of both forms on a variety of outcomes. In the "Family Matters" below, you will discover new evidence to suggest that what matters most to the individual and relational health of family members is simply whether or not demand/withdraw patterns are present, regardless of who is enacting which role.

BOX 10.4 FAMILY MATTERS: A META-ANALYTICAL REVIEW OF THE DEMAND/WITHDRAW PATTERN OF CONFLICT

Communication scholars Paul Schrodt, Paul L. Witt, and Jenna R. Shimkowski collected the findings from 74 studies on the demand/withdraw pattern of conflict published between 1987 and 2011 (including an aggregate sample of 14,255 individuals). Using meta-analysis, which involves assessing the average effects for a variable across an entire body of research, Schrodt and his colleagues found no significant difference between the average effect of wife demand/husband withdraw and husband demand/wife withdraw on individual outcomes (e.g., personality traits), relational outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, marital adjustment, intimacy), and communication outcomes (e.g., conversational flexibility, decision-making, topic avoidance). On average, demand/withdraw patterns produced a

stronger effect on all outcomes for samples of distressed (or clinical) participants than for samples of nondistressed participants. Also, the average effect of demand/withdraw patterns was stronger for relational and communicative outcomes than it was for demographic factors (e.g., socioeconomic status, years of education) and well-being (e.g., anxiety, depression, self-esteem). In the end, Schrodt and his colleagues argued that it is not the specific roles that partners enact within the demand/withdraw pattern so much as it is the presence or absence of demand/withdraw behavior that seems to be particularly distressful to the relationship. By helping us distinguish the *most frequent* form of demand/withdraw patterns (i.e., wife demand/husband withdraw) from the *most damaging* form (i.e., neither is more or less damaging than the other), they demonstrated that research on family conflict matters.

For further reading, see Schrodt, P., Witt, P. L., & Shimkowski, J. R. (2014). A meta-analytical review of the demand/withdraw pattern of interaction and its associations with individual, relational, and communicative outcomes. *Communication Monographs*, *81*(1), 28–58. https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2013.813632

In addition to the demand/withdraw pattern, researchers have also studied a pattern of conflict in families referred to as serial arguments. A **serial argument** refers to a set of argumentative episodes that focuses on a particular issue and extends over time.[49] Serial arguments often arise from violated expectations, different perspectives on the relationship, or different value/belief systems.[50] Looking back at the case study we used to open this chapter, imagine how Callie's and Peter's conflict is likely to persist over time if Callie chooses to continue her close friendship with Kirby and Peter continues to question her faithfulness to their marriage. At the core of every serial argument is an incompatibility between family members that persists over time. Thus, you may not be surprised to learn that the number of serial argument episodes that partners report is positively associated with

demand/withdraw patterns of conflict, hyperarousal, and thought intrusiveness, each of which in turn predict partners' stress.[51] In parent–child relationships, researchers have also found that the more resolvable the issue is perceived to be by young adult children, the less likely they are to continue a serial argument with their parents, unless the argument is very intense and involves rumination about the issue or is relatively benign and trivial.[52]

As you can see, demand/withdraw patterns and serial arguments represent two related, but distinct patterns of family conflict associated with relational quality in family relationships. How family members choose to manage each pattern of conflict, however, depends on the interaction rules that have emerged within the family system over time.

Rules for Family Conflict

In Chapter 5, we discussed the development of rules that govern interaction and behavior in the family system. Members of family systems also develop implicit and explicit practices and rules governing the expression of conflict messages. For instance, researchers have found that couples generate or employ four kinds of rules in managing their differences: (a) rules governing consideration (e.g., don't belittle me, don't blame the other unfairly, don't make me feel guilty), (b) rules governing rationality (e.g., don't raise your voice, don't get me angry, don't be so aggressive), (c) rules governing specific self-expression (e.g., let's keep to the point, let's be honest, don't exaggerate), and (d) rules governing conflict resolution (e.g., explore alternatives, make joint decisions, give reasons for your views).[53] Rules governing conflicts differ when couples or families are in public or in private. The rationality rules are used more in public settings as one may not expect a partner to "make a scene." These rules can become a part of coping strategies in both private and public settings on how to vent negative feelings, how to avoid conflicts, and how to find support in others.

Rules for conflicts in families with children have great variation. In some families, children cannot "talk back" to parents and other adults. In other

families, children are encouraged to speak up about their feelings. In disciplining children for conflicts, the rules again vary. Some parents have rules that prohibit any hitting or verbal abuse while others believe spanking or screaming are necessary and, at times, appropriate.

Conflict Patterns in Family and Couple Types

One of the primary ways that researchers have studied the conflict patterns and rules that characterize family systems is to test for differences among family and couple types. As we discussed different family and different couple types in Chapter 8, you may have thought about how communication behaviors are likely to vary across different family types, including conflict patterns and rules. Over time, the family system develops patterns of conflict behaviors that characterize the group, if not the individuals. Let's explore some of these patterns before turning our attention to unresolved conflict in family systems.

Family Communication Patterns

Family conflict varies depending on how much family members use *conformity orientation* and *conversation orientation*.[54] Remember in Chapter 2 that we referred to four types of families that are created with these two orientations (see Figure 2.5). In which kind of family did you grow up? Did your family rely primarily on a conformity orientation, a conversation orientation, or some combination of both in its conflicts? For example, if your family type was pluralistic, then children's views were heard in family disputes. There was a conversational quality about your disagreements. You could argue with Dad or your obnoxious sibling. This way, all siblings could develop verbal competence. Your parents would listen and not avoid conflicts, like a high conformity-oriented family would. The interplay of these two orientations affects how family members engage in conflicts.

As you might expect, families' conversation and conformity orientations affect how they deal with conflict. Families high on conformity orientation focus on avoiding conflict whereas families high on conversation orientation often do not.[55] In one family with a high conformity orientation, the father dictated their family norm of avoiding conflicts. When conflicts arose, Dad would pronounce, "'Nuff said," and discussion about that issue would cease. More than other family types, consensual families frequently express their negative feelings and seek outside support from friends and relatives to deal with conflicts, enabling them to better cope with negativity. Conversely, protective families avoid outside social support but regularly vent negative feelings expressed in emotional outbursts.[56] Clearly, researchers have demonstrated that not all families will experience and express conflict in the same way.

Gottman's Conflict Types

Although Fitzpatrick's marital typology, which we discussed in Chapter 8, is widely known, other scholars such as relationship researcher John Gottman have classified different types of couples according to the style of the conflict interactions the couple experiences.[57] Specifically, Gottman found clues to lasting marriages in the communication of the couple and identified three couple types based on their conflict behaviors: (a) validating couples, (b) volatile couples, and (c) conflict avoiders. In *validating* relationships, partners respect one another's point of view on a variety of topics and, when they disagree, try to work out a compromise. This couple type agrees on most basic issues of sex, money, religion, and children. When they disagree about roles, they listen to one another and refrain from shouting or "hitting below the belt." *Volatile* couples are comfortable with disagreement and lack of harmony. Any question over roles and who does what and when leads to open conflict. They fight often and not always fairly – even so, the conflict tends to be productive and energizes the relationship. On the other hand, *conflict avoiders* abhor negative messages and go to any length to keep from engaging in conflicts.

Partners placate and please one another rather than meet their own needs. They walk away from arguments, often giving family members the silent treatment. They are comfortable with standoffs and uncomfortable with rage or protest.[58]

A central contributing factor in marriages that do not end in divorce is the couple's ability to manage and resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship.[59] Conflict is going to occur in marriage, and Gottman argued that expressing anger, disagreeing, and airing complaints is a very healthy activity for spouses. In fact, Gottman and his colleagues proposed that validating, volatile, and conflict-avoiding couples can all have lasting marriages; the most important factor is not a couple's style, but that the couple has a five-to-one ratio of positive to negative messages during interactions. In other words, partners need to offer at least five compliments or statements of affirmation and appreciation for every instance of criticism in their marriage. This means that couples can and should express their frustrations and disagreements, but it is important that these are not the types of messages that dominate their interactions. When thinking about this ratio of positive to negative sentiments, how well are you doing in your romantic relationship (if you are currently participating in one)? How well did your parents maintain this ratio? In your estimation, how important is Gottman's five-to-one ratio to maintaining a healthy and satisfying marriage?

Gottman's years of research have resulted in the ability to predict with a great deal of accuracy which marriages are in danger of moving toward separation or divorce by observing their communication. One clue is the ratio of positive to negative messages we previously discussed. Distressed relationships were also marked by what he called "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse."[60] These are four communication behaviors that can occur during interpersonal conflict and can have very negative outcomes for the particular interaction and for the relationship:

- *Criticism*. Criticism is sometimes confused with complaining. Complaining can be healthy for a marriage if directed toward the

partner's behavior rather than toward personal characteristics.[61] When a spouse complains productively, they are focused on behaviors that can be changed. When a spouse criticizes, the focus is on the person's character. For instance, Bridget and Liam have an ongoing disagreement about the amount of time Bridget spends working, both at the office and when she is home with the family. Bridget really likes her work and believes she can advance very quickly if she out-produces her colleagues. Liam may start out with complaints about her behavior, "You worked most of the weekend again, leaving me no time to relax or do anything I enjoy." By focusing on the behavior, Liam and Bridget can talk about how many hours would be reasonable to work over the weekend. If Liam's complaints turn into criticisms, he will attack her character, "You are so selfish, working all the time." It is much more productive to try to manage a conflict over an acceptable number of hours to work versus what it means to be unselfish.

- *Contempt*. Contempt is considered criticism with the intention to insult and psychologically abuse the other person. Contempt may be displayed through verbal and nonverbal communication. If Bridget's and Liam's conflict about the former's work hours is not resolved, an argument exhibiting contempt may include Liam yelling at Bridget face-to-face or sending an e-mail all in capital letters, "SO YOU'RE THE BIG SUCCESS AT THE OFFICE, HUH? ENJOY IT, BECAUSE YOU'RE THE BIG FAILURE AT HOME!" Gottman proposed that we can recognize messages of contempt when mockery, hostile humor, hurtful sarcasm, insults, and nonverbal behaviors such as eye-rolling are present. Liam might exhibit contempt in digital form by texting Bridget at work repeatedly, saying nothing but announcing the time, "9:15 PM," "9:45 PM," "10:30 PM." When contempt is present, spouses have a difficult time identifying anything positive in their partner or saying anything positive.
- *Defensiveness*. Defensiveness is a natural response to criticism and contempt. When being attacked, spouses may use defensive techniques such as denying responsibility, making excuses, responding with a

complaint about the spouse, or whining. To Liam's contempt, Bridget may respond: "Shut up! All I am doing is trying to keep up with your spending habits! If you didn't want to always buy new things, I wouldn't have to work so hard!" The major problem with defensiveness is that it prevents partners from trying to understand each other's perspective. In addition, once one partner is defensive, it is very easy for negative emotions and defensive communication to well up in the other partner as well.[62]

- *Stonewalling*. Stonewalling means the partner removes themself either emotionally or physically from interaction. Spouses often believe that stonewalling is a way of trying to keep things calm and not make them worse. However, in reality, stonewalling is akin to giving up on trying to communicate and manage conflict productively. Husbands are more likely to use this technique, and this can be particularly difficult on their wives, whose heart rates go up when their husbands stonewall them.

Although withdrawing from one conversation or even flying off the handle once in a while does not signal the end of a marriage or family, when the behavior sequence of the "Four Horsemen" becomes a communication pattern, the relationship is headed toward disaster. Gottman pointed out that even if these behaviors are present, couples can still turn their marriages around. Ultimately, these behaviors are to be seen as serious warning signs that changes need to be made.

Unresolved Conflict

Although counselors and family therapists often focus on helping couples and family members resolve their disputes, not all conflicts are necessarily resolvable. Likewise, just because a family is not actively arguing about an issue does not necessarily mean that the issue over which they have had conflict is resolved.[63] In fact, experts in conflict often talk about "conflict management" rather than conflict resolution, as so many conflicts are

ongoing. For example, a daughter-in-law may have an ongoing conflict with her mother-in-law who gives unwanted advice that is perceived as intrusive by the daughter-in-law, especially if she perceives the motivation to undermine her own marriage or parenting.[64]

When at least one of the family members involved in a conflict believes that the conflict is impossible to resolve, it hinders those involved from resolving their dispute.[65] What happens in the family if conflict cannot be resolved? The answer to this may depend on the family. Some families are able to cope and live with unresolved conflicts in ways that do not hurt their relationships.[66] In other families, unresolved conflict is negatively associated with relationship satisfaction.[67] One factor will be how important or central the issue is to the family's identity or functioning. If a critical issue cannot be resolved, some or all members of the family may suffer psychological and/or physical estrangement and separation.[68] If a child will not accept his father's remarriage or a parent will not accept a child's religious conversion, psychological and physical distance or separation follows. Young family members may remain in the home but withdraw from family activities and find connection with others via the Internet. Some members may be cut off from all contact with the family and may be treated as non-existent.

When irresolvable conflict occurs over issues that are central to the identity of individuals or the family system, pessimism and frustration result.[69] In some relationships, unresolved conflict may even lead to interpersonal violence.[70] Those that persist over time and are central to the personal and relational identities of partners often result in dissolution of the relationship. In a couple, one or both partners may withdraw and begin to see the end of their formal relationship as the only logical solution. Although spouses may choose to divorce, when children are involved, the ex-spouses will likely find that their previously unresolved disputes spill over into their post-divorce connection as co-parents. This means some level of ongoing interaction will continue as former spouses remain as co-

parents, which can be very challenging to navigate as the couple did not handle conflict well during the time they were married.

In the end, couples with unresolved conflicts may stop short of separation because the cost of dissolving their romantic relationship may be too great; yet the rewards of continuing to live together may be few. In these cases, unresolved conflict may add great tension to the entire family system. When an issue is unresolvable, it may be more functional for the family to avoid the issue and direct its communication to areas that bring cohesion.[71] On the other hand, family members may learn over time to live with topics that are avoided because the pain of addressing them is too great. Regardless, those individuals who want to fight for their relationship or for their family to stay together may find hope in seeking outside assistance.

As you can see, family members experience and express conflict differently depending on the unique patterns of behavior and rules that characterize their family system. Some families continue to revisit old wounds or incompatible positions in the hope of bringing some sense of closure and forgiveness to an issue that once divided family members, whereas others learn to live with unresolved conflict despite the persistent tension that it creates. How a family conflict unfolds is often determined by whether or not individuals use destructive or constructive behaviors to manage their conflict. Let us first turn our attention to destructive conflict behaviors that challenge healthy family functioning before concluding this chapter with a discussion of constructive conflict behaviors.

BOX 10.5 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. How have you witnessed the demand/withdraw pattern of conflict in your parents' relationship or in the relationships of other

extended family members (e.g., between grandparents or between an aunt and uncle)? Who is typically the demanding partner and who is typically the withdrawn partner?

2. How well did your parents meet Gottman's five-to-one ratio of positive to negative messages in their relationship? If they met or exceeded his ratio, how did that help model for you what it means to manage conflicts in a constructive manner? If instead they struggled to meet his ratio, how did that model ineffective or destructive conflict management?
3. Looking at Gottman's "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," which of these behaviors have you enacted in conflicts with your parents? In conflicts with your siblings or with extended family members?

DESTRUCTIVE CONFLICT IN FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Some conflicts have enormously destructive outcomes. In this section, we divide destructive conflict into two types – covert (hidden) and overt (open) – and we discuss how families may sometimes use these types to cope with conflicts. Conflict behaviors may range from extremely covert (e.g., purposefully burning dinner, not showing up for a family dinner, or leaving a family member out of vacation photos posted on Facebook) to blatantly overt (e.g., hostile words, pots or fists flying). In addition, partners with highly problematic conflict patterns may find themselves discussing a variety of problems that have little to no direct connection to the present disagreement, including mental disorders, drug addiction, chronic illness, and threats of unemployment, to name a few.[72] These individual problems can often contribute to conflict escalation within the family system. Perhaps the most extreme form of overt, destructive conflict is interpersonal violence. Whether it occurs in the form of verbal aggressiveness that emotionally abuses family members or in the form of physical attacks, such

violence represents the worst kind of destructive conflict. Of course, verbal and physical aggression are not the only forms of destructive conflict behaviors, as family members often use a variety of covert tactics to control and manipulate each other.

Covert Destructive Conflict

In covert conflict, or what some scholars call “guerrilla warfare,” emotions are hidden, and messages are often unclear, sometimes intentionally. Family members may cover up hurt or express anger indirectly in order to preserve equilibrium in the system and keep relationships intact. Specifically, family members express conflict covertly using one of the following five communication strategies: denial, disqualification, displacement, disengagement, and pseudomutuality. **Denial** occurs when an individual claims not to be upset or to have an issue despite sending nonverbal messages that suggest otherwise. It most frequently occurs when one hears “No problem! I’m not upset” or “That’s OK, I’m fine” accompanied by contradictory nonverbal signals. Sometimes acquiescence strategies such as apologizing, pleading, crying, or conceding are ways that family members discount stronger feelings and deny their deeper levels of hurt.[73] **Disqualification** describes situations in which a person expresses anger and then discounts, or disqualifies, the angry reaction. For example, a father might say “I’m sorry, I was upset about the money and got carried away,” or a mother might say “I wouldn’t have gotten so upset except the baby kept me awake all night.” Admittedly, these messages are valid in certain settings, but they become a disqualification when the person intends to cover the emotion rather than admit to it and address it.

Displacement occurs when a person’s anger is directed to an inappropriate person. Displacement is depicted in the story of the man whose boss yelled at him but the man could not express his anger at the boss. When he arrived home, he yelled at his wife, who in turn grounded her teenager, who in turn hit the fourth-grade sibling, who in turn kicked the dog. When a person believes anger cannot be expressed directly, the

individual finds another way to vent the strong emotions. Dangerous displacement occurs when parents who cannot deal emotionally with their own differences turn a child into a scapegoat for their pent-up anger; over time, they become the "acting-out" child. Relational members judge messages as more hurtful and distance themselves from the relationship when they perceive that a message was intentionally hurtful and part of a pattern of hurtful messages, rather than an isolated instance.[74]

Disengagement happens when members avoid each other and express their hostility through their lack of interaction. Essentially, disengaged family members live within the hollow shell of relationships that used to be functional. Instead of dealing with conflict, they keep it from surfacing and may even go to extremes to avoid conflicts.

Finally, **pseudomutuality** represents the opposite of disengagement, as it characterizes family members who appear to be perfect and delighted with each other because no hint of discord is ever allowed to dispel their image of perfection. In other words, family members who communicate that their relationships are peaceful and harmonious publicly while privately stewing in unresolved anger and bitterness are engaging in pseudomutuality. The anger remains below the surface to the point that family members lose all ability to deal with it directly. Pretense remains the only possibility. Only when one member of the "perfect" group develops ulcers, exhibits a nervous disorder, or acts in a dysfunctional manner do the relational cracks begin to show.

In some cases, spouses and romantic partners may use (or perhaps, abuse) their sexual connection in tandem with other covert strategies to express their relational dissatisfaction. For some couples, sex is a weapon in guerilla warfare. Demanding or avoiding sexual activity is often an effective way of covertly expressing hostility. Sexual abuse, put-downs, excuses, and direct rejection wound others without the risk of exposing one's own strong anger. Such expressions of covert anger destroy rather than strengthen relationships.

Covert conflict behaviors are often associated with certain family themes that discourage conflict or independence. Themes such as "We can depend

only on each other" or "Never wash your dirty linen in public" encourage family members to hide conflicts. These covert strategies of conflict relate to the belief that conflict equals powerlessness.[75] Family members who view themselves as victims and powerless to change or influence others use less threatening covert techniques to reduce conflicts. When family members become insular and hide conflicts from others, they also miss out on the opportunity to get help or social support from extended family, friends, or even professionals who might be able to assist them.

Overt Destructive Conflict

Whereas covert conflict behaviors are always indirect to some degree, overt destructive conflict behaviors include direct messages of hostility, often in the form of verbal and/or physical aggression that can lead to violence. Domestic violence occurs when one family member imposes their will on another through the use of verbal and emotional abuse, and often through physical force. In this situation, the violent family member intends to inflict pain, injury, or suffering, either psychological or physical, on other family members.[76] Although you may think that what constitutes violent behavior is generally understood by all, particularly when it violates acceptable social norms, different forms of behavior may be tolerated within some cultures but not in others.[77] Threats are violent messages that warn family members that they will be punished now or later if they do not comply with the wishes of the aggressive member.[78] Although the causes, forms, and outcomes of family violence are indeed complex, communication scholars generally agree that intimate partner violence emanates from a variety of biological, psychological, social, contextual, and interactional factors.[79] Not only does partner abuse and parent–child abuse often become part of ongoing role relationships within the family system, but in physically combative families, such behaviors occur frequently enough for children, husbands, wives, or partners to experience it as normative. For instance, researchers have found that when children are exposed to destructive

conflict between adults, it affects their own conflict management behaviors.[80]

Think back to Chapter 9 in which we discussed power, influence, and decision-making. Our discussion of overt destructive conflict is tied to those issues. For instance, if the purpose of conflict is to meet one's own needs and if aggression increases the chances of getting those needs met, then the emotional and physical health of a partner may become a secondary concern during the conflict.[81] Some family members will win at any cost or use aggression as power to attain the goal at the emotional expense of other family members. This power extends beyond physically abusive behaviors, as violent husbands seem to assume more of the power of decision-making in their families than do nonviolent husbands.[82] If power is unequal between members in the family, especially in the marital dyad, the conflicts that involve negative strategies could be attempts to more equitably balance power within the family. Furthermore, researchers have documented inconsistencies between men and women in terms of how often they report abuse, as women often do not label or talk about their violent experiences as *abusive*.[83] Nevertheless, conflicts that include anger, physical abuse, and alcohol and drug use definitely do have long-term effects on women's health.[84]

The terms *violence* and *aggression* are often used to generally define both physical attacks and verbal attacks.[85] Physical violence such as hitting, screaming, kicking, grabbing, and throwing objects characterizes some family conflicts. On average, men are more likely to bully, drive dangerously, hold and shake, or roughly handle a child or partner than women and children, who more often endure these painful behaviors.[86] Because women are smaller in size and often have fewer options for leaving relationships, they may be at greater risk for physical injuries.[87]

Verbal attacks can also characterize family conflicts and inflict as much, if not more pain than physical attacks, as some scholars believe that "Words hit as hard as a fist."[88] One particular type of verbal attack is called **gunnysacking**, which involves storing up grievances against someone and

then dumping the whole sack of anger on that person when they pile on the "last straw." People who gunnysack store resentments and wield their gunnysack when a family member does that "one more thing." The offender usually retaliates, and the battle escalates.

PHOTO 10.1 Sometimes partners exaggerate nonverbally as part of their conflict style.

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Clearly, verbal aggression, physical violence, and gunnysacking are but a few examples of overt destructive conflict behaviors that plague relationships in some family systems. In the following subsections, we discuss further what researchers have to say about violence and aggression in the contexts of intimate partner relationships and parent–child relationships.

Partner Destructive Conflict

Destructive conflict between romantic partners is widespread. In the late 1990s, for example, approximately three-fourths of all couples admitted making threats of violence to one another.[89] According to the National Research Council's Panel on Research on Violence against Women, up to two million women are battered by an intimate partner each year.[90] The American Bar Association reported that 84% of spousal abuse victims are female.[91] But violence may be even more prevalent in couples than these numbers indicate. For instance, one form of violence that scholars have

only recently begun to study is referred to as situational couple violence. **Situational couple violence** occurs when a conflict gets "out of hand" and leads to one or both partners using "minor" forms of violence during the dispute.[92] Although it can escalate into serious, sometimes even life-threatening, forms of violence, it typically occurs in only a handful of conflicts among the total number of conflicts that couples report having each year. It differs from abuse in that the power between partners ebbs and flows, rather than residing solely with one partner who abuses the victim partner.[93]

In her research on relational aggression, communication scholar Loreen Olson developed a theoretical typology of intimately violent couples by differentiating how power moves between partners, characterizing different types of conflict.[94] Specifically, in her typology she distinguishes abusive (and mutually abusive) couples from violent (and mutually violent) couples, aggressive (and mutually aggressive) couples, and combative (and mutually combative) couples. For example, abusive couples have frequent (weekly) and severe types of violence where one partner typically possesses all of the power in the relationship, whereas violent couples display very high levels of aggression bimonthly, but power may alternate between partners. Aggressive couples exhibit moderate levels of violence about once a month where again, power may ebb and flow between partners depending on the topic of conflict, and combative couples have episodic, mildly violent episodes that are infrequent (once a year). Each of these types can be further defined by being particular to an individual or to both members of the couple.

Conflict about certain emotionally charged topics is more likely to be accompanied by physical or verbal aggression between intimate partners. When asked to describe situations in which conflict resulted in aggression, Olson and her colleague found that their participants most frequently reported situations in which the behavior of the partner was problematic, such as drug/alcohol use, lack of motivation, or not coming home.[95] Their participants also reported life change events and the involvement of a third

party (such as a past partner) to be accompanied by physical or verbal aggression. Likewise, some of their respondents reported that aggression became more severe during the course of the relationship. Others explained that aggression in their intimate relationship began as severe and declined over time. In essence, Olson and her colleague found stable patterns of aggression in some relationships, cyclical patterns of aggression in others, and oscillating patterns (up and down) in a handful of relationships.

Not surprisingly, the language used by family members influences conflict outcomes. Word choice reflects the degree of emotion and reveals the amount of respect the conflicting individuals have for one another. For example, when people are highly emotionally aroused in conflict situations, this negatively affects their ability to process information and respond appropriately.[96] It is sometimes easy to underestimate the very real damage that verbal aggression can bring to individuals and to family systems. In some families, swearing is an integral part of venting rage. In others, the rules do not permit swearing, but name-calling replaces it. Put-downs heighten conflicts and slow the management process by selecting words that describe and intensify bad feelings.

Although most research on partner destructive conflict has focused primarily on straight relationships, an increasing number of studies have explored abuse in LGBTQIA+ couples, as gay and lesbian couples may also use physically aggressive or occasionally violent tactics in relational conflict. Although some patterns of conflict may be similar between straight and LGBTQIA+ couples, this is not always the case. For example, the simplistic abuser–victim split observed by most professionals trained to deal with violent couples is more complicated in lesbian relationships since certain negative behaviors may be considered more or less aggressive by lesbian partners.[97] When lesbian couples have children, their decisions to remain together after abuse are affected by whether or not the children were born into the relationship.[98]

Regardless of sexual orientation, a power imbalance may affect how partners express or deal with conflict. For instance, a **chilling effect** occurs when a less powerful partner is hesitant to complain or express grievances

out of fear that the more powerful partner will use punitive power and respond to the complaint with verbally or physically aggressive messages.[99] This chilling effect increases when the less aggressive partner feels that the more aggressive partner is less committed to the relationship, has more alternatives, or is less dependent on their partner for needs of love and affection. Undoubtedly, the chilling effect exists in many marriages and leads to destructive conflict.

Finally, it is important to note that divorce from a physically violent partner may not mark the end of the relationship, especially in cases where there are children. The typical case is a victim mother with custody of the children who is expected to facilitate the children's visits with the violent father. The mother continues to be at risk of violence and the children will undoubtedly be affected by exposure to the violence. Tragically, the history of intimate partner violence is not always known by the courts, and even when it is, it is not often considered an important factor in visitation and custody decisions.[100]

Parent–Child Destructive Conflict

In 2012, approximately 678,810 children were the victims of child abuse and neglect in the United States.[101] Of the 678,810, 78% were neglected, 18% were physically abused, 9% were sexually abused, 8.5% were the victims of psychological maltreatment, and 2.3% were the victims of medical neglect.[102] Abusive parents have skewed perceptions of parental discipline, as abusive parents view their children as more difficult and therefore in need of more power-assertive forms of punishment, such as threats, reprimands, whippings, and orders to comply, rather than suggestions for altering their behaviors.[103] Abusive mothers rank the value of punishment higher than abusive dads and nonabusive couples. Likewise, abusive parents send mixed messages by failing to enforce rules consistently and then hitting or kicking children for disobedience.

Communication scholar Steve Wilson and his colleagues analyzed eight observational studies of parent–child interactions and found that families

with a documented history of child abuse or neglect had different interaction patterns than did families with no history of child abuse or neglect. Specifically, parental acts of negative touch (e.g., hitting, slapping, and spanking) were more frequent in families with documented histories of child abuse or neglect. In addition, child noncompliance was less frequent in families with no history of child abuse or neglect.[104] Adopting a social-interactional explanation for child abuse, Wilson and his colleagues argued that physically abusive parents react in an inconsistent and ineffective manner to children's noncompliance, thus using physical discipline more quickly than nonabusive parents.[105]

Even in situations where there is no physical abuse, mothers have more of a tendency to interact with their children in negative ways. For instance, a mother's potential for child abuse is inversely associated with how much she uses affirming or soliciting behaviors when interacting with her child.[106] Clearly, child abuse is a large societal problem that has implications for the present and the future. For instance, children who see their parents hit one another are also more likely to be hit, sons who have violent fathers tend to become abusive to their own wives, and one in five men who are sexually abused as kids repeat the abuse with their own children.[107] However, some scholars caution that there are multiple ways of interpreting the research findings that suggest that abused children become abusers.[108] Although this section focuses primarily on negative things that family members do to each other, it is also important to note that child neglect, or what parents fail to do for their children, can be just as severe.[109]

Although not often talked about, incest represents a very extreme form of family violence. Usually cloaked in a family secret only held by the victim and the perpetrator, incest is often not revealed until adulthood, when the victim has left the family home. In their study of sexual abuse in children and adolescents, communication scholar Sandra Petronio and her colleagues found that victims are bound by rules enforced by those who violate them. The victims were vigilant about guarding the release of information about the abuse, as they wanted to be in control of what would happen to them if

they disclosed the truth. Petronio and her colleagues concluded that trust was central in the victims' decisions to disclose, as too many children feared that they would be held accountable for any legal action, such as parental arrest, or be beaten for their disclosure of parental abuse.[110]

Children are not always the victims of destructive conflict, however. Sometimes parents are the recipients of physical or verbal abuse from their adolescent children. Parents in such situations often feel powerless to stop the abuse. They feel that they have lost the power to be a parent and that they cannot turn to the legal system for help. A parent being abused by an adolescent may disengage from that child. Following a family systems perspective, it is not surprising that adolescent-to-parent abuse affects the parents' marital relationship, as well as other family relationships.[111]

As you can see, there is a host of covert and overt destructive conflict behaviors that undermine healthy conflict management processes in families, erode relational quality, and impede healthy family functioning. When managed using more appropriate communication behaviors, however, family conflict can facilitate personal growth and enhance family wellness. In the final section of this chapter, we will explore a variety of constructive conflict behaviors that should help you engage your family members in healthy conflict management practices.

BOX 10.6 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. Think back to a recent conflict you experienced with a family member or a romantic partner. What is one thing you did poorly during this conflict? And how do you know you did this poorly?
2. How might learning about different types of overt and covert destructive conflict tactics help you more effectively manage your

family conflicts in the future?
3. In previous family conflicts, which of the covert destructive tactics have you used most often?

CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT IN FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Increasing our understanding and learning skills to deal constructively with conflict can have an optimal effect on family relationships for years to come. In general, scholars seem to know more about what makes conflict destructive and less about what makes it constructive.[112] Not only does a couple's ability to handle conflict well have benefits for their children, but children who see their parents successfully manage conflicts and share affection typically feel more secure about the future of their family and about their own relationships.[113] In fact, when children witness constructive conflict management practices, it often has a positive influence on their own responses to future conflicts that they encounter.[114]

In constructive conflict experiences, happy couples or children go through sequences that lead to successful conflict management. Communication scholar Douglas Kelley points to the important role that managing strong negative emotions and forgiveness play in successful conflict experiences.[115] Family members learn that they can either agree or disagree and bring out their ideas and feelings during an argument. If family members can listen to one another, they can better understand motives, opinions, and feelings. Because children are younger and have less vocabulary to use, they must have a climate in which they can participate in the disagreement, if the conflict relates to them. Children's responses to harsh messages vary greatly, as some children are sensitive and will suffer immediately, whereas others will not show any harm for a long time.[116]

As we discussed earlier, John Gottman concluded that satisfied couples maintain a five-to-one ratio of positive to negative sentiments in healthy relationships.[117] He found that it was not the way couples resolved their incompatibilities that prevented divorce so much as it was how they communicated about their incompatibilities. This single five-to-one ratio determined relational longevity, despite conflict styles that ranged from openly combative to passive–aggressive. Additionally, couples exhibiting a collaborative conflict management style (see Figure 10.1) typically report higher levels of marital satisfaction than couples who do not use a collaborative style.[118] This is good news for those of us wanting to manage conflict in our own relationships – even when it is hard to put into practice, knowing the importance of this positive-to-negative messages ratio gives us something tangible to shoot for. Other scholars corroborate Gottman's work by suggesting that when it comes to conflict, family members tend to respond "in kind" and will reciprocate both positive and negative messages from their conversational partners.[119] With this in mind, let's conclude our discussion with a brief overview of some strategies you can use for constructive conflict management.

Strategies for Constructive Conflict

▶ Scripts

Although we describe specific methods of improving family communication in Chapter 12, in this section, we will briefly discuss three constructive conflict behaviors that are useful for enhancing your abilities to resolve conflict in a healthy and competent manner: (a) listening, (b) fair fighting, and (c) managing the physical environment.

Active Listening

Active listening serves as the cornerstone of constructive conflict management. It serves to defuse conflict and helps clarify and focus the issues being debated.[120] Sometimes just asking the other to “tell me more” indicates your interest in learning another person’s perspective, and it gives you an opportunity to make sure you understand what that person is thinking and feeling. Empathic listening requires that you listen without judging while attempting to recognize the feelings and attitudes behind the other person’s remarks. A comment such as “You’re really angry” or “That had to bring up all the sadness again” communicates to a family member that you’re listening without becoming trapped within your own emotions. Restating what you have heard another person say can be most helpful in clarifying a point or slowing the escalation of conflict. For example, using a question such as “So are you saying … ?” allows your conversational partner to repeat their point and helps bring greater clarity to the issue. Some partners will go so far as to switch roles in a conflict and repeat the scene to check out the accusations. It gives one partner a chance to experience the other partner’s feelings.

Fair Fighting

Bitter family conflicts typically result from the use of unfair tactics by various members, although this can be changed with a commitment to what has been called “fair fighting.” In a fair fight, equal time must be provided for all participants; name-calling or “below-the-belt” remarks are prohibited. In this process, family members agree on how they will disagree, including specifying shared speaking time and topic limitations. Such strategies can be used only with the mutual consent of the parties involved and the assurance that each will listen to the other person’s messages. Distressed couples often have great difficulty with fighting fairly. They readily exchange one-for-one negative remarks and cannot cycle out of negative-feedback loops. They continue blaming and fail to build on remarks that would lead to change and resolve the conflict.[121]

In fair fighting, family members try to stay in the present and not bring up past fights or grievances. They specify what it is that they feel caused the conflict. Each family member takes responsibility for their part in the fight and does not blame the others. In one family, for example, Jim tells Michelle, his wife, “I really felt angry this evening when you told Rebecca that she didn’t have to go to the church program with us. I worry that you give her more freedom than she can handle.” With this approach, Jim continues to release his anger during the time granted to him by his wife. According to the rules of fair fighting, he can express his anger only verbally – no hitting or throwing things. Michelle can deny the charges Jim makes, which can lead to a careful recounting of what was said and with what intended meanings. This often helps clear the air. She can also ask for a break until later if she becomes angry and cannot listen.

Sometimes flexibility and compromise will not resolve conflicts. An individual’s self-image may be more important than family expectations of flexibility. Some families permit members to decide what is negotiable and non-negotiable for them. Stating “This is not negotiable for me at this time” enables one to own their position and part of the problem. Speaking tentatively and including a phrase such as “at this time” leaves the door open for future discussion.

Whatever rules or methods couples and families use in their fighting, the nonverbal aspects of conflict management need special attention. Careful monitoring of nonverbal cues often reveals the true nature of conflict in ways that words themselves cannot.[122] Threatening gestures, rolling one’s eyes, or refusals to look at others indicate the intensity of the conflict. Sometimes nonverbal cues contradict verbal statements. A receiver of such mixed messages must decide “Do I believe what I hear or what I see?” In the end, though, supportive nonverbal cues may drastically reduce the intensity of a conflict, as a soothing touch or reassuring glance has great healing power.

Managing the Physical Environment

In addition to active listening and fair fighting, your choice of how you use time and space may soften or heighten certain conflicts. For example, sitting directly across from someone makes it easier for you to maintain eye contact and to be less likely to miss important verbal or nonverbal messages. Family members in conflict need to be aware of all the factors that can escalate a fight, as choosing an appropriate and private space lessens distractions or other problems related to the dispute.

It is important to think carefully about the role of technology in family conflict, as you have likely encountered various issues related to technology and privacy in your own family. Technology is a part of the physical and social environment of the family, as families communicate with and about technology.[123] They must deal with issues such as where to put computers in the home and what level of privacy users can expect.[124] Parents and children may have conflict over who owns and has access to cell phones, laptops, tablets, and other technology. They may also struggle over time spent on technology versus in interaction with the family. We know that technology has expanded family boundaries exponentially, making it possible to import more information and people into the family system.[125] Technology has the potential to increase conflicts at all life stages, but especially between parents and adolescents as families navigate the need for rules for Internet access and use that were unnecessary just a few years ago.[126] Technology is also challenging for families as adolescents often possess advanced skills that their parents do not have, and as parents search for new ways to protect their children and monitor Internet use.[127] Although families will continue to benefit from technology use, they will simultaneously continue to struggle with how best to integrate it and navigate conflicts over its use and influence.

As we hope you can see, the rewards of effectively managing family conflicts are numerous. The use of constructive conflict behaviors slows the collective toll that frequent conflicts take on the health of family relationships, as a series of minor conflicts left unresolved can escalate into separation, divorce, or emotionally punishing relationships. Successful

communication and conflict management leads to emotional health and reconciliation in families, and effective conflict skills can lead to greater appreciation for each family member. The following summary of strategies for constructive conflict reflects our integration of many pieces of prescriptive advice. Although the following elements of constructive conflict are generally agreed upon within our culture, it is important to note that across different cultures, some of these elements may be viewed as less important while others may be seen as more critical.

Elements of Constructive Conflict

When a family conflict has been successfully managed, it will typically include an interaction in which (a) each participant perceives they have equal and ample time to express their point of view; (b) feelings are identified appropriately, not suppressed; (c) individuals listen to each other with empathy and without constant interruption; (d) the conflict remains focused on the issue and does not get side-tracked into other previously unresolved conflicts; (e) differences of opinions, values, or desires are respected; (f) individuals believe solutions are possible and that growth and development will take place as a result of healthy conflict; (g) functional rules that evolved from past conflicts are used to manage the disagreement; and (h) effective problem-solving skills are used to settle differences.

Constructive conflict management and resolution strategies seldom emerge if older family members do not model them, and young people fail to learn these communication and problem-solving skills. Of course, guidelines for disagreement must be culturally sensitive in order to be effective. After years of researching interpersonal conflict and social influence, communication scholar Michael Roloff identified several important reminders about managing conflict, three of which we believe provide a nice conclusion to our discussion of constructive conflict: (a) do not assume that the absence of argument indicates agreement, (b) what you do not do matters as much as what you actually do, and (c) silence does not mean the conflict is over.[128]

BOX 10.7 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. Think again about a recent conflict you experienced with a family member or a romantic partner. What is one thing you did well during this conflict? And how do you know you did this well?
2. Of the three types of constructive conflict behavior (i.e., active listening, fair fighting, and managing the environment), which one do you believe is the most difficult to enact on a consistent basis?

CONCLUSION

Few experiences hold as much potential for personal growth and change as do the conflicts you experience with other family members, yet family conflicts can also hurt and hinder the quality of your family relationships. The difference lies in learning how to successfully manage your disagreements and disputes with appropriate and effective communication behaviors. To help you accomplish this goal, we began this chapter by defining interpersonal conflict, discussing five different conflict management styles, and describing six stages of ongoing conflict in family systems. We then explored some of the conflict patterns and rules that characterize different types of couples and family systems. After distinguishing covert destructive conflict from overt destructive conflict, we concluded this chapter by discussing several constructive behaviors that should help you enhance your conflict management skills. Ultimately, we view conflicts as inevitable, potentially rewarding interactions that contribute to the management of differences within families. As families are

in a continual state of fluctuation, adjustment, and change, conflict will always be a part of the human experience and an important communication challenge.

Key Words

Antagonistic discourses
Chilling effect
Situational couple violence
Cross-complaining
Demand/withdraw pattern
Denial
Disengagement
Displacement
Disqualification
Gunnysacking
Interpersonal conflict
Nonantagonistic discourses
Pseudomutuality
Serial argument

FLASHCARDS

where one person advocates for one discourse or perspective and another advocates for an opposing discourse

occurs when a less powerful partner is hesitant to complain or express grievances out of fear that the more powerful partner will use punitive power and respond to the complaint with verbally or physically aggressive messages.

occurs when a conflict gets "out of hand" and leads to one or both partners using "minor" forms of violence during the dispute

involves responding to another person's complaint or criticism with one of your own while ignoring the other person's point.

an asymmetrical pattern of behavior in which one partner pressures the other through emotional demands and complaints, while the other retreats through withdrawal, avoidance, and passive inaction

occurs when an individual claims not to be upset or to have an issue despite sending nonverbal messages that suggest otherwise

happens when members avoid each other and express their hostility through their lack of interaction

occurs when a person's anger is directed to an inappropriate person.

describes situations in which a person expresses anger and then discounts, or disqualifies, the angry reaction

involves storing up grievances against someone and then dumping the whole sack of anger on that person when they pile on the "last straw."

as “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties, who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals.”

although they reflect dialectical contradictions, nevertheless, they do not lead to interpersonal conflict

represents the opposite of disengagement, as it characterizes family members who appear to be perfect and delighted with each other because no hint of discord is ever allowed to dispel their image of perfection

refers to a set of argumentative episodes that focuses on a particular issue and extends over time

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CHAPTER 11

Family Communication and Stress

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BOX 11.1

Families experience the highs and lows of life together. At times, these lows can be periods of difficulty and stress and can even become a family crisis. Death, divorce, job loss, or illness create hardships for individuals and their families. How do families get through difficult times? What makes some families feel closer to one another after a crisis while other families separate from one another? How do individuals cope with and in opposition to other members of their family? After reading this chapter, you will be able to

1. Understand how unpredictable stress prompts family coping processes.
2. Apply theories of resilience to experiences of family stress.
3. Identify family communication processes unique to specific crises.

FACING AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Erin and Luke Johnson were excited to be expecting their first child. On the day they went for their 20-week ultrasound, they had no idea how profoundly everything would change. They were shocked to learn that their unborn daughter had spina bifida, a birth defect that involves the incomplete development of the spinal cord. Erin was devastated. Every dream she had for her life and her children had changed. She couldn't eat, she couldn't sleep, and she couldn't stop crying. Erin and Luke wanted to hope for the best, but there were so many unanswered questions and terrifying statistics. All of a sudden, the Internet became the scariest place in the world. Even though Luke and Erin were normally very open with their families of origin, they talked about it and decided not to tell either set of parents right away. They didn't want to alarm their families, especially as this was the first grandchild on either side, and they just did not want to receive a lot of unsolicited advice at the moment.

As time went on, Erin and Luke found hope. They met with a specialist who talked them through what this might mean, and they did additional research and felt better prepared to handle the news. They met with Pastor Gonzales from their church, who encouraged them to rely on their faith, and came to believe that their daughter was going to come to them exactly how God intended her to come to them. Erin and Luke found support online from other parents who had children with spina bifida, and learned about a clinical trial for prenatal surgery they could consider. They also called their parents who have been much calmer and more supportive than they had expected.

DAUGHTER OR COUNSELOR?

College junior Adelina Perez had just started her junior year of college when she received a phone call from her mother stating that she had left her father and was planning to file for divorce. Adelina was devastated and

particularly sad for her mother, who she knew had always tried her best to make the marriage work. She'd known that her parents had problems – both Adelina and her brother Ethan had heard their parents fighting on many occasions and the fighting had grown worse in recent years. But she always thought her parents would work it out and stay together. Now that Ethan had started his first year of college, Adelina realized that her parents had probably stayed together until she and her brother were out of the house.

Adelina had many talks with her mother over the next few months and became, in a sense, her mother's confidante. Although she and her mother became closer during this time and Adelina was glad to be a support for her mother, there were many things her mother told her about that she wished she hadn't, such as her father's infidelity, his emotional abuse toward her mother, and their financial problems. Her relationship with her father, which was never good to begin with, became more and more distant. Adelina's relationship with her own boyfriend of two years, Elliott, also began to deteriorate as Adelina began to have doubts of whether she could trust Elliott.

"I never thought we would have to deal with something like this." These words have been spoken by countless family members as they faced unexpected challenges, such as home foreclosures, loss of employment, loss of property in natural disasters, or the illness or death of a loved one. Just as difficult are events we fear might happen to our family, such as losing a father to cancer, hearing a mother has relapsed into alcoholism, dealing with a parent's military deployment, or having a young son experience a recurrence of his cancer. As hard as it is to think about these kinds of events happening in the life of our own families, knowing more about them and how families communicate and manage unpredictable stress can help us be better prepared when difficulties do arise. As we discussed in Chapter 4, families experience some stress as they transition through developmental phases. In the current chapter, we focus on stressors that are unexpected or unpredictable. We first discuss unpredictable stress and family coping

patterns. Second, we will explore communication and family resilience. Finally, we will talk about communication during specific crises.

UNPREDICTABLE STRESS AND FAMILY COPING

Stress represents a disturbance in the family system, or a disturbed equilibrium.[1] **Unpredictable stress** is brought about by events or circumstances that disrupt life patterns but cannot be foreseen. Unpredictable stress usually results from significant negative occurrences, such as untimely death, divorce, economic challenges, or serious illness or injury, much like the case of Erin and Luke Johnson at the start of the chapter. Such stress may also develop more slowly, but come to a head, as was the experience of Adelina Perez in the second case. When we think about unpredictable stress, negative things that are distressing come to mind, but positive events such as a large inheritance, wedding, promotion, or the rediscovery of long-lost relatives may also challenge individuals and their family system.[2] For instance, researchers have noted how the return of a parent from war, which is seemingly a positive event, can be stressful as the family adjusts to having two parents again, becomes reacquainted with the parent who was deployed, and adapts roles that have been enacted in the deployed partner's absence.[3]

All families undergo some degree of strain or stress; they are normal parts of life in a family system. **Strain** can be defined as tension or difficulty sensed by family members that indicates change is needed in their relationships and in their family environment. **Stressor events**, which we discuss further in this chapter, are characterized by unexpectedness, greater intensity, a longer duration, and by their undesirability and serious effects.[4] A **crisis** is an unexpected, negative event that inhibits a family from functioning in their usual manner.[5] It occurs when a family lacks the resources to cope or the demands on the family are greater than their ability to respond in a typical manner.[6]

Theorists have distinguished between stress and trauma. **Trauma** is a lasting response to a stressful or scary event (e.g., accident, assault, natural disaster) that has implications for one's feelings of safety, identity, and emotion regulation. Trauma occurs when an event overwhelms one's capacity to cope. Trauma differs from stress and crisis. Stress can be managed, whereas trauma "is a stress so great and unexpected that it cannot be defended against, coped with, or managed."[7] A crisis effects family functioning for a period of time, whereas trauma involves long-term difficulties in which individuals experience a nervous system response of panic, fear, or terror well after the event is over and physical safety has been reestablished. Individuals grappling with trauma can experience triggers, where they experience an involuntary recall of the event that causes their body to react as if they were in danger. For example, a soldier returning from wartime deployment might hear a car backfire and feel as though they are experiencing gunshots again. Trauma is defined in relation to an ability to cope, so events are not experienced equally among individuals and families. For example, a mother's car accident and hospitalization may be stressful for one member and traumatic for others in the same family system, and what may be a stressor for one family is traumatic for another.

Stress in these varying degrees of intensity involves a physiological response to stressors that involves physical preparation for action and subsequent exhaustion as the body recovers.[8] Individuals or family systems experiencing prolonged stress and/or trauma experience physiological and psychological changes as their heightened anxiety affects their coping patterns. Family systems under stress tend to fall into predictable patterns, some functional and some dysfunctional, as the members try to cope individually and collectively. In order to understand the processes of coping that occur, we will explore (a) the family stress model, (b) stages of family crisis, and (c) ambiguous loss.

Family Stress Model

Each family exhibits unique coping behaviors. In families, **coping** refers to "the central mechanism through which family stressors, demands, and strains are eliminated, managed, or adapted to."[9] The family stress model that we present here explains processes through which families experience stressors, highlighting the factors that contribute to whether a stressor becomes a crisis. Reuben Hill's original ABCX model[10] identifies these factors as "*A* [the stressor event], interacting with *B* [the family's crisis-meeting resources], interacting with *C* [the family's definition of the event], produces *X* [the crisis]."[11]

In this model, the stressor *A* represents a life event or transition that has the potential to change a family's social system – indeed, its life course. Events such as the loss of a job, untimely death, unexpected military deployment, serious illness, or a major win in the lottery may fall into this category. Thinking about the first case at the start of the chapter, you can envision how Erin and Luke Johnson felt when they found out their baby would have spina bifida. A stressor event itself is not positive or negative; it is neutral until the family members place their interpretations on it.[12]

The *B* factor represents the resources a family can use to manage the stressor and avoid creating a crisis; these include money, friends, time and space, or problem-solving skills. A family's levels of cohesion and adaptability influence their access to and use of resources. Resources may come from individuals, family members, and the community.[13] For example, if a child wanders away from home, both community and family resources are needed to conduct thorough searches of the area. If a mother is diagnosed with colon cancer, the cancer hospital becomes a key resource.

The *C* factor represents the importance a family attaches to the stressor. For example, a diagnosis of juvenile diabetes might overwhelm the entire system for one family, whereas another family might cope relatively well, perceiving the diabetes as a manageable disease that is unlikely to alter their lives drastically. The extended family members' views of the stressor may also influence perceptions of the crisis: A three-generation family that has never experienced a divorce may define a granddaughter's marital

separation as a severe crisis, whereas a multigenerational system with a history of divorce may see the separation as sad, but not as a crisis.

Together, *A*, *B*, and *C* contribute to the experience of stress that is unique to each family, depending on its background, resources, and interpretation of the event. The *X* factor represents the amount of disruptiveness that occurs to the system – in effect, it captures a family's inability to restore stability and the continuous pressure family members feel to make changes in the family structure and in their patterns of interaction.[14]

Hill's groundbreaking ABCX model focused on the pre-crisis state of the family. From a family communication perspective, however, it is equally important to consider how members of a family system interact and cope over time. To that end, family scientists McCubbin and Patterson developed a double ABCX model, based on Hill's original work, that incorporates post-crisis variables (see Figure 11.1), or the next stages of coping.[15]

In this model, the *aA* factor includes not only the immediate stressor but also the demands or changes that may emerge from individual family members, the family system as a whole, and the extended family system. McCubbin and Patterson suggest that the *aA* factor includes (a) the initial stressor and its hardships, (b) normative transitions, (c) prior strains, (d) the consequences of the system's coping attempts, and (e) ambiguity. Imagine, for example, the death of a 36-year-old man who was the sole breadwinner for his family, consisting of a wife and three daughters, ages 6, 10, and 14. When a young father dies, the system must deal with the immediate loss, as well as potential economic uncertainty and changes in the mother's role. In addition, a child's developmental stage may impact the family's coping, such as requiring the family to acknowledge the need of an adolescent who is grieving increased independence. The new stress is also compounded by any prior strains, such as mother–daughter conflicts, and a consequence of the family's attempts to cope may lead to new stress. For example, researchers have examined how romantic partners who lost a child might find that they grieve in very different ways, with one needing to grieve alone and the other needing to grieve together.[16] These incompatible needs in such difficult circumstances put even more strain on the couple's

communication at the worst possible time. Finally, the confusion of family members taking on new roles might cause ambiguity. For example, a widowed mother may later remarry, bringing further change.

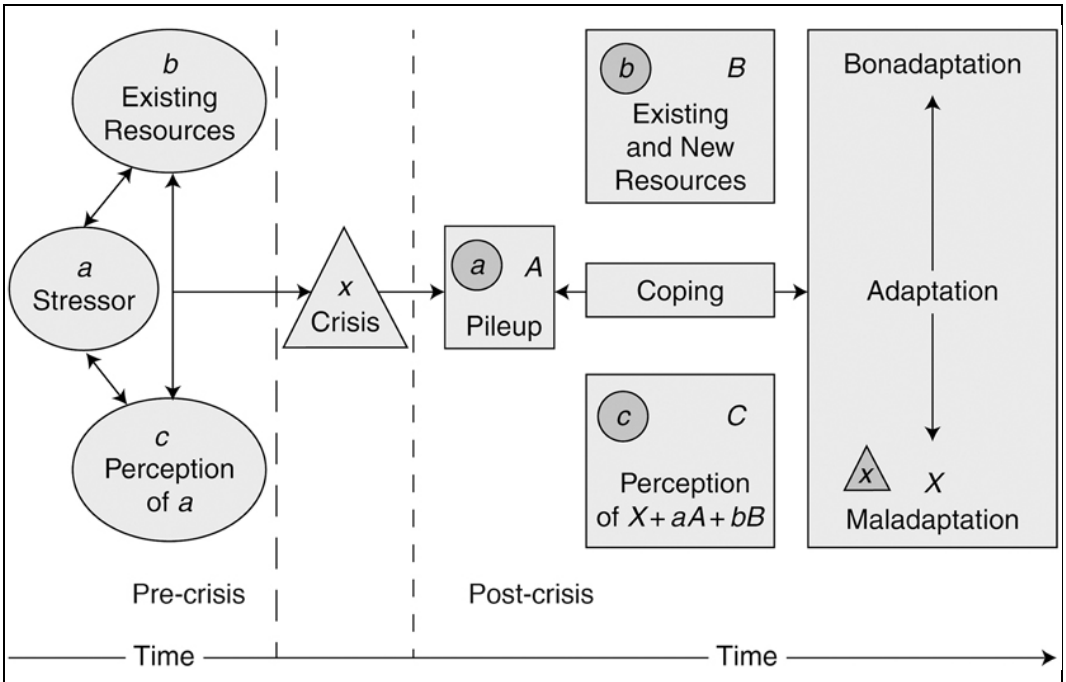

FIGURE 11.1 The double ABCX model.

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The *bB* factor represents the family's ability to meet its needs. Over time, a family relies on existing and new (or expanded) resources. Existing resources reflect a family's background – for example, in the case of the death of a young father/sole breadwinner, these may include the ways in which a family coped in the past when the father was gone on long business trips. The expanded family resources emerge from the crisis itself. The young widow may create new resources by studying accounting, which leads to a well-paid position, or by joining a self-help group for those who have lost partners to death. These emerging social systems are a critical element in the *bB* factor.

The *cC* factor refers to the ways in which a family interprets a crisis, including the meaning the family gives both to the stressor event and to the added stressors caused by the original crisis. When a young father dies, a family must cope with that event and its meaning. If the mother believes she has lost her only chance at happiness in life, her perceptions will strongly influence her recovery and the attitudes of her children. Family members must also interpret the changes in finances, changes in the mother's role, and how the entire family is affected. In families that manage such a situation well, members adapt to changes in responsibilities and provide support to one another. Families that have difficulty coping, however, find themselves overwhelmed, with little sense of hope or opportunity for growth.

The *xX* factor represents the effect of the family's adaptation on the individual, family, and community levels. Family adaptation is achieved through reciprocal relationships where the needs and demands of an individual or set of family members are met by the capabilities of another, so that the family system achieves a balance of interaction related to the crisis itself.[17] If a member's demands are too great for the family's capabilities, or if the family's demands are more than the community can meet, there will be an imbalance. Conversely, family and workplace demands may create an imbalance whereby affected family members expect too much of one person.

You can think of family adaptation on a continuum. When positive outcomes result, **bonadaptation** occurs, which refers to a balance between a family member and family system, as well as between the family and community. According to communication scholar Katheryn Maguire, a family experiencing bonadaptation may find they are functioning at the same level or at an even better level than they were before the stressor event and may experience a long-term benefit to their family communication patterns.[18] On the opposite end of the adaptation continuum is **maladaptation**, which simply refers to incomplete, inadequate, or faulty adaptation; it reflects imbalance or severe losses for the family. Regardless

of whether disruptions are resolved in positive or negative ways, the whole family system reacts to the crisis.

Importantly, communication provides the mechanism through which families manage stressors. Communication scholar Katheryn Maguire advanced a communication-based coping model grounded in the components of the double ABCX model that puts communication at the center of the family coping process in times of crisis.[19] Maguire outlines how communication is central to experiences of stress and crisis. She identifies five ways communication is situated in the family stress model:

1. Communication as a source or symptom of stress: Poor family communication or extended periods of destructive and harmful conflict may be the negative stressor on the family. Alternatively, poor communication may be the symptom of a major stressor on the family.
2. Communication as meaning-making: The *cC* factor from the double ABCX model (how the family perceives the stressor) is expressed, in large part, through family communication about the stressor. Family stories can reveal how the family makes sense of the stressor.
3. Communication as a resource: Social support through family communication can be an important coping resource for families during a crisis.
4. Communication as a coping strategy: Numerous forms of communication may help family members cope with a crisis, including journaling, humor, relational maintenance, and disclosure.
5. Communication as an indication of the status of individual, relational, or family health: Family communication can also be a measure of how well a family has adapted to the crisis.

The family stress model and the related communication-based coping model help us predict and understand the kinds of stress-related issues families face and the role of communication in co-creating stressors and strategies for managing family stress. With this in mind, let’s turn our

attention to the stages of family crisis that often characterize the individual and collective experiences of family members.

Stages of Family Crisis

In any crisis situation, members go through a process of managing loss, grief, or chaos. Depending on the circumstance, this process may last from a few days to several months or years. Stages of family crisis may be evident when dealing with major events, such as a death or news of an incurable illness, but in any crisis, most family members experience a progression of feelings from denial to eventual acceptance. Sometimes a member becomes stuck in the coping process, never reaching the final stage. In the case of Adelina Perez at the start of the chapter, we see her in the early stages of this process as her parents have announced their divorce. At the same time, we see a foreshadowing of some long-term effects on her ability to establish trust in her own intimate relationships. Although it is tempting to look for simple answers regarding how best to communicate and act to manage family stress and crisis, the concept of equifinality in Chapter 1 reminds us that we can get to the same place in different ways. No two families will experience and approach a crisis in the same way, and each family will move through the coping process in a different way.

The following stages describe the general process of grieving significant losses: shock, recoil, depression, and reorganization.[20] After a critical life event, moving through such stages usually results in transformation of the family system. Individuals may find themselves more separated from, or connected to, different family members and experience a shift in their adaptability patterns. Family members' communication patterns reflect and move members through the four stages. Thus, understanding the process allows an individual to analyze other family members' progress through the stages or to be more understanding of one's own behavior and personal progress. Below we describe each of the four stages.

Shock/Denial

During the *shock/denial* stage, family members tend to deny the event or its seriousness. Comments such as “It can’t be true,” or “It’s a mistake” are accompanied by nonverbal behavior, such as awkward attempts at smiles and encouragement with a terminally ill person or spending money lavishly when the paycheck has been cut off. Most people move from this stage, eventually exhibiting behaviors that indicate a recognition of reality. Family members acknowledge their grief and feel the pain of the loss. Withdrawal or quietness characterizes the communication of those who find it hard to cry. The news of the crisis begins to take on fuller meanings, such as “Mom will never be the same” or “I can’t believe that our home and everything in it is just gone.” Denial is transformed into an intense desire to recapture what has been lost, especially in the case of a family death, illness, or severe injury. This may lead to actions that deny reality – for example, “I picked up my phone to text Alex before remembering he’s not there” or “I still automatically set the table for five people and then I catch myself.”

PHOTO 11.1 The unexpected death of a key family member may send a family into shock and role confusion.

RichLegg/iStock

Recoil

After the initial blow, family members may move into the recoil stage of blaming, anger, and bargaining. Blaming often takes place as the grieving family members seek reasons for what has happened. This may include blaming the self (“I was too trusting” or “I never should have left town”) or blaming others (“It’s his own fault” or “The doctors didn’t tell us the truth soon enough”). Such reactions may be interspersed with feelings of “It’s not fair.” Anger may be directed at the event or person most directly involved or may be displaced onto others, such as family members, friends, or coworkers. Attempts at real or imagined bargains may occur (“If I take a cut in pay, they could hire me back” or “If you come back, I’ll stop gambling forever”). Thoughts that the world is unfair or that God has been cruel to let this happen fill the minds of individual family members and may be communicated to one another.

Depression

Frequently, family members coping with a crisis experience some level of depression; an overwhelming sadness permeates the family members’ thinking. Whereas anger is directed outward, depression is directed inward. Usually, family members need to talk about what has happened. In fact, they often retell the crisis story over and over. This represents a normal and healthy response, especially for families experiencing a long period of suffering because of death, incurable illness, permanent injuries, a long jail sentence, or mental breakdown. People outside the family often fail to understand the sad person’s need to talk and may attempt to avoid the subject, not recognizing that being supportive may involve just listening.

Reorganization

Finally, family members who have faced crises usually move on to what is described as a "turning point." It may be a moment of recognizing the finality of the event or of realizing one must move ahead with life. From a systems perspective, this is the stage where the family recalibrates the system and moves to a new or altered set of behaviors. For example, one researcher studied communication between divorced spouses and identified 11 turning points in which the renegotiation of boundaries and intimacy changed, usually from negative patterns of relating to more positive ones over time. The researcher found that over time and in a pattern of trial and error, divorced couples learned how to move ahead in their relationship with one another.[21] Usually, a decision marks the turning event. Post-divorce decisions leading to reorganization include selling the family home, taking wedding pictures off the wall, going on a first date, or joining a post-divorce support group. This stage is characterized by family members' taking charge of their lives and making the necessary changes forced on them by the crisis.

If crisis emotions could be diagrammed, the line would begin with the impact of the news, begin descending at the impact of the news, and continue its decline with some upward movement in the recoil stage that diminishes as reality returns. The line's lowest point would be in depression, after which most people move upward toward recovery (see Figure 11.2).

Throughout this process, communication is the way that family members co-create new meanings, and it serves to link family members as they share their reactions. It also links one or more family members to outside sources of institutional or social support. If family members become cut off from support or cannot talk about their loss, they may become stuck, unable to complete the process and reach acceptance.

Ambiguous Loss

Although crises are major events that are fairly easy to recognize due to their severity, sometimes family members experience *ambiguous loss*,

characterized by high uncertainty regarding personal relationships.[22] There are two types of ambiguous loss: The first type occurs when individuals are perceived by family members as being physically absent but psychologically present. This includes soldiers missing in action and kidnapped children. Couples who want to have children but experience failed attempts at pregnancy may also experience ambiguous loss.[23]

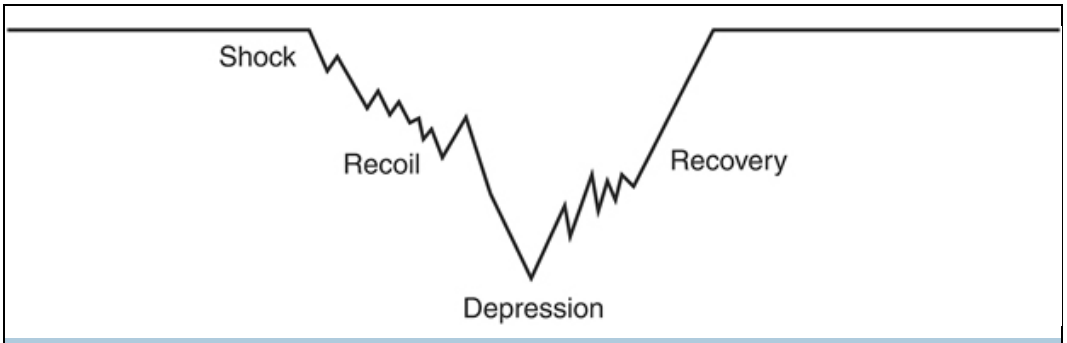

FIGURE 11.2 Linear scale of emotions during crisis.

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The second type of ambiguous loss occurs when an individual is perceived as being physically present but psychologically absent. This includes people with addictions, serious head injuries, or Alzheimer's disease. Researchers have found that wives whose husbands had Alzheimer's disease experienced a state called "married widowhood" – although they could visit their husband in the nursing home facility, many felt like widows as the husband they knew was lost to them.[24] Such losses are often referred to as causing "frozen grief" because they limit the grieving process due to the uncertainties involved.

When a family experiences an ambiguous loss, these stages cannot be fully completed. Family members struggle with how to move on because a long-term coma victim may wake up or a missing soldier may return. Eventually, most members learn to normalize the ambivalence in order to move on. Fortunately, most families come to understand loss as a normal

part of life and find resiliency in managing loss.[25] In the next section, we will consider the role of resilience in supporting families after crisis occurs.

BOX 11.2 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. Think back to a difficult event that your family experienced. How were aspects of the Double ABCX model able to explain this experience? What resources were helpful? How did your family interpret the event in ways that made it harder or easier to cope? Did this event turn into a crisis for your family? Why or why not?
2. How was communication with your family at work during difficult moments? In what ways was communication a source of stress or a resource? How did communication help you make sense of the situation or aid in coping? How did communication in these difficult periods reflect your family's closeness or separateness?
3. Have you experienced a form of ambiguous loss? If so, how did that loss feel different than other stressors you have experienced? What was helpful for you when coping?

COMMUNICATION AND FAMILY RESILIENCE

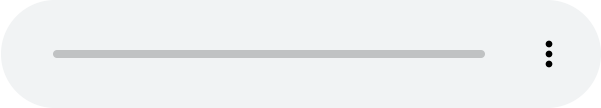
When dealing with stress, it is possible for family members to have productive outcomes while simultaneously experiencing the difficulties inherent in managing stressful circumstances. Certainly, some families fare better during stressful situations than others. **Resilience** is a family's ability to function well in the midst of adversity.[26] Resilience involves "bouncing

back" after difficult life events. In fact, the word resilience comes from the Latin word *resilire*, which means "rebound." At its core, resilience involves adapting to challenging and difficult situations. Families establish resilience through their communication with one another. Communication scholar Patrice Buzzanell argued that resilience is not a fixed state or something that some families have and others do not; rather, resilience is the ability to develop ways of managing adversity. It is "constituted in and through communicative processes that enhance people's abilities to create new normalcies."[27] For example, couples who suffer through the loss of a child together by building intimacy during the grieving process (rather than growing apart) would be considered a resilient family.

Two theories help us understand the communication processes central to resilience: the theory of resilience and relational load and the communication theory of resilience. We will examine each theory in this section.

Theory of Resilience and Relational Load

Communication scholar Tamara Afifi and her colleagues authored the theory of resilience and relational load (TRRL) to explain how resilience is created and maintained in relationships.[28] A TRRL framework positions relationships as powerful modifiers of how stress affects individuals by examining two components: (a) relational maintenance and (b) communal orientation.



▶ Scripts

Relational Maintenance

TRRL theorizing points to "how people maintain their relationships on an ongoing basis, which affects how stressed they feel and how they communicate with their loved ones when they are stressed."[29] Afifi

positions relational maintenance as a mechanism through which families manage stress. Relational maintenance allows families to build up "relational reserves" that can protect family relationships during stressful events. Actions such a physical touch, affirming statements (e.g., "I love you"), helping with everyday tasks, and spending time together strengthen family bonds. A family with a strong relational reserve can draw from previous maintenance during a crisis. For example, a couple who has a history of positivity and mutual support is in a solid position to manage an unexpected unemployment. This couple can rely on their foundation of respect and care, even if the unemployed spouse suffers from feelings of low self-worth and personal responsibility in compromising the family's financial well-being. A couple with high relational reserves can support one another through financial hardship by encouraging one another and leaning on their strong bond rather than casting blame. However, families who are "overdrawn" on a "relational bank account" struggle to maintain positive connection and co-regulate stressors during a crisis.[30] A couple with weak ties or a lack of warmth may feel insecure in their bond. The relationship may be threatened more easily by the stress of unemployment, and they may have trouble seeking and receiving support from their partner during the crisis.

Communal Orientation

Communal orientation has to do with the degree to which family members view one another as a team. Families with a strong communal orientation are more likely to have a history of relational maintenance and thus, a strong relational reserve to bolster them during stress. The feeling that you are not alone can affect the way you experience a stressor. In the example in the previous paragraph, an unemployed spouse may likely take comfort in knowing their partner is by their side, contributing to the family finances, and encouraging them their next steps for their career. Such support can sustain both individuals and the relationship during the hardship, allowing the family to bounce back after the job loss.

Relational reserves and communal orientation together explain how stressed individuals feel and how they communicate during a crisis, with implications for levels of individual and relational resilience. People in relationships with high levels of relational reserves and communal orientation are able to maintain a positive outlook and stay connected to their partners in difficult times.

Researchers have also examined the TRRL in non-romantic family relationships. For instance, scholars Lisa Guntzviller and Ningxin Wang surveyed Spanish-speaking mothers and their adolescent children about the family's experience of language brokering, occurring when bilingual children translate for non-English speaking parents.[31] They found that mother and child maintenance behaviors served as a protective factor against stressors related to language brokering: mothers' support and children's positive feelings about language brokering were related to lower levels of child depression.

Let's take a moment to get to know TRRL author Tamara Afifi in this "Family Portrait."

BOX 11.3 FAMILY PORTRAIT: DR. TAMARA D. AFIFI, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT SANTA BARBARA

Dr. Afifi's website: https://www.comm.ucsb.edu/people/tamara-afifi

What drew you to study family communication?

One of my graduate courses (taught by one of the authors of this book – Dr. Braithwaite!), along with a course I took on the Impact of Divorce on Children by Dr. Paul Amato, inspired my love for family communication.

What are your main areas of family scholarship?

I study how family members communicate when they are stressed and its impact on personal and relational health, as well as information regulation in families (e.g., avoidance, privacy, secrets). I study the theoretical properties of family members' communication patterns (e.g., conflict, social support, verbal rumination, communal coping) across a variety of stressful situations, to explain and predict biological stress responses, resilience/thriving, and personal/relational health.

How has your own family influenced what you teach and study?

I was always interested in studying family communication because of the avoidance patterns in my own family. I grew up on a farm in Minnesota in a town of 800 people. My family tends to be quite avoidant and is more action-based rather than disclosive and showing affection. Studying interpersonal and family communication allowed me to better understand my family's avoidance patterns and their implications.

How can family communication students use your research in their own family life?

Students tend to love taking family communication classes because almost everything they read can apply to their own lives. For instance, all families experience stress. However, the way your family members

communicate when stressed can profoundly affect your personal and relational health, as well as the health of your family members. Families are a system. A change in one part of the system has an impact on the other parts of the system. I tend to study whole families for this reason. To truly understand family communication, we need to study families as complex systems of stress and resilience/thriving.

Communication Theory of Resilience

Buzzanell explains that resilience is not a state to be achieved, but rather a process centered in communication and "cultivated through messages, family rituals, stories of recovery and remembrance, visits to past family homes or ancestral sites, and retention of objects, sayings, and connections whose objective utility or 'worth' belies their symbolic connections."[32] The communication theory of resilience (CTR) helps us understand how communication facilitates family resilience. Specifically, CTR theorizing suggests that "resilience is activated by a trigger event,"[33] such as natural disasters, a chronic illness, or an unexpected loss. Buzzanell highlights five processes families engage in as they interact, adapt, and co-create aspects of their family system during and after crisis and trauma: (a) crafting normalcy, (b) foregrounding productive action while backgrounding negative feelings, (c) affirming identity anchors, (d) maintaining and using communication networks, and (e) putting alternative logics to work. We describe each of these next.

Crafting Normalcy

Unexpected crises tend to create large disruptions in the family life. Some may wonder if anything will ever feel normal again after receiving a cancer diagnosis or losing a loved one in a car accident. Creating a sense of normalcy helps individuals get through the early stages of grief and loss and lays a path for life after a crisis. Normalcy is co-created through

communication, or as Buzzanell says, it is "talked into being."[34] Families can create a sense of normalcy by continuing everyday routines and celebrating rituals and traditions, even if specifics change as a result of the crisis. Consider the changes a family might make after a child receives a cancer diagnosis and begins cancer treatments that make the child's immune system very fragile. The family may still celebrate the child's birthday but with modifications to keep the child safe. Instead of a birthday party with friends, they may have the child sit at the window of their hospital room and ask friends to drive by at a certain time to send greetings from the parking lot and leave a present with a family friend. This allows the family to continue to celebrate the child's birthday without putting the child at risk. Or, after a losing a mother in a car accident, a family may make her favorite cake each year on her birthday to continue a beloved family tradition and honor her legacy in her absence. Normalcy may look and feel different, but there are still connections to the former family structure and values that can anchor individuals after a loss.

Foregrounding Productive Action While Backgrounding Negative Feelings

The ability to see the good and the bad at the same time can be difficult. Yet this resilience process points to the power of simultaneously acknowledging the difficulty inherent in crisis while emphasizing the behaviors and mindset needed to keep moving forward. It is important to acknowledge the difficult feelings that arise in crisis, including fear, grief, and stress. However, rather than only focusing on the negative, families can emphasize positive and hopeful aspects within the situation. This particular process holds complexity in that both negative and positive feelings are present. For example, researchers found that mothers diagnosed with breast cancer talked about the importance of staying positive when talking to their children, emphasizing how lucky they were to have access to good treatment for their cancer.[35] Rather than repressing negative aspects of the situation or "putting on a happy face,"[36] this process calls for families to

acknowledge the difficulty of the situation while understanding that emphasizing only the negative makes it hard to move forward. Take, for example, a stepfamily who acknowledges the difficulties involved in creating a new family structure. Rather than only focusing on the problems with the new family, stepfamilies can engage in relationship-building strategies such as expressing support, acceptance, and openness, even in the face of conflict and growing pains.[37]

Affirming Identity Anchors

We all have personal and relational identities that are meaningful to us and define who we are. These identity anchors can be important during times of upheaval because they provide a sense of self and connectedness that endures even in the face of loss. For example, a woman may draw significant meaning in her role as a mother after a divorce, continuing to understand herself as a skilled caretaker of her children even as a newly single woman. In the opening vignette of the chapter, Erin and Luke drew on their faith to affirm their sense of self and stability amidst processing the difficult news of their unborn daughter's spina bifida diagnosis. Scholars Haley Horstman and colleagues interviewed South Africans about their experience of apartheid, finding that South Africans identifying as Black, Colored, or Indian affirmed an identity anchor of toughness that allowed them to remain strong even during adversity. Families also use mantras and metaphors to hold fast to the values that characterize their family system. Dawn O. Braithwaite and Bailey Oliver-Blackburn note that a stepfamily may say "we bend and don't break" as they work together to build a new family structure after unexpected changes.[38]

Maintaining and Using Communication Networks

Individuals and families aim to make sense of difficult events through their communication with one another. Leaning on in-person and mediated relational networks during and after a crisis helps individuals get a better

understanding of difficult events. At times, networks have to be reconfigured in the wake of a crisis. One researcher explored the communication networks used by former foster youth (FFY) after separation from their original families. She noted that FFY ties to biological siblings were an important source of resilience. One participant was placed in a foster home with her brother, and their bond sustained them through the family transitions. She said, “In my foster years, it was only my brother, Nathan. When I could be around him, we were best friends. We were like twins. We shared a lot; it was almost like I could read his mind.”[39] Other FFYs were separated from their biological siblings but were able to maintain communication virtually, whereas others experienced a total separation from siblings and leaned on ties within the new foster family. Having others to provide support and perspective can be a vital part of getting through a difficult event.

Putting Alternative Logics to Work

A key part of resilience is the ability to see life’s difficulties in a new light. Reframing hardship can assist families in coping processes and offer strength to continue on after significant loss or difficulty. For example, one research team found that couples used humor to reframe a partner’s breast cancer diagnosis and treatments.[40] Joking about the cancer patient’s hair loss and inability to not vomit after eating provided levity and bonding during the difficult days of chemotherapy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, families reframed the long months of quarantine by reframing “stuck at home” to “safe at home”; some families experienced increased closeness as a result of slower schedules and more time together, even while the virus shut down schools and businesses and took many lives. Putting alternative logics to work allows families to transform their thinking, at times bringing lightness and new ways of seeing things into the forefront to lessen the negative feelings and experiences related to stressful events.

BOX 11.4 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. How have relational reserves helped you and your family get through difficult times? What forms of relational maintenance were the most helpful for you and your family?
2. How has a communal orientation helped you deal with a stressor? Was there a time when you felt like your family member was on your team as you navigated a difficult situation? How did such a feeling help you cope?
3. Which of the five CTR processes have you experienced when dealing with stress? How did the communication in that process help you feel more able to bounce back after a crisis or stressor?

COMMUNICATION AND SPECIFIC CRISES

Throughout this chapter, we have been examining the unpredicted stressors and the resiliency processes families experience. We have offered several examples of stressors to illustrate these processes. In this section, we'll focus on four types of specific crises that have been studied extensively: untimely death, disability, separation and divorce, and military families. But remember, events less dramatic than those discussed here (such as moving or losing a job) also disrupt the family system by altering dreams or plans and introducing new tensions into the family.

Untimely Death

The finality of death is an emotionally overwhelming crisis for most families. Although the death of any family member carries with it a sense of grief, the death of an elderly person who has lived a full life does not generate the anger aroused by untimely death, nor does it carry the potential for major role changes for most family members. However, the untimely death of a younger or middle-aged family member is a major crisis for many families. Surviving partners or children are not prepared for the loss or the role changes. Sudden death, such as in a car accident, provides family members no opportunity to say farewell or resolve relationship issues with the individual. Death by homicide appears to be most directly related to post-traumatic stress disorder, grief, and despair.[41] It is a particularly critical issue given rates of gun violence in the United States. Untimely death throws a family into severe shock, often resulting in prolonged mourning across many years.[42]

The death of a child is a very devastating event for a family. It carries with it the loss of parental dreams of their child, violating the natural order of life – the belief that children outlive parents. As communication scholars Paige Toller and Dawn O. Braithwaite observed, "A child's death affects every aspect of a parent's life and the marital relationship in particular."[43] The grieving process can be seen as both a personal and a social journey.[44] Toller and Braithwaite found that bereaved parents can at times clash with one another in their grief. Although wishing to help the other, each parent grieved differently, complicating a very difficult process. Over time, and painfully, couples learned to accept their differences in communication needs and styles. In a related study, Toller examined how parents constructed their identities following their child's death.[45] For example, how do they answer the question about how many children they have? Or how do they sign a family Christmas card or letter? Over time, some parents chose rituals as a way to celebrate the presence of the child in their life. For example, they might celebrate the child's birthday or tend their gravesite that day.

The death of a child in a family affects communication throughout the family system. Communication with surviving children changes as parents mourn while continuing to care for the living children.[46] Adolescents who lose their siblings experience a painful and complex grieving process that is unique to each child.[47] Although the grief of parents receives much attention (and understandably so), it is important for parents and other family members to attend to communication with, and the needs of, the siblings as well.

Stillborn birth and miscarriage are special cases of child death. Among women who have experienced stillborn birth and miscarriage, distress is greater when the pregnancy had been planned, when they know the medical reason for the loss, and when they place a high value on motherhood.[48] Researchers in Sweden found parents' grieving to be complex and intertwined with their relationship as partners, with moments of togetherness and withdrawal. The majority of parents reported that their relationship became closer even though they grieved in different ways than their partner.[49] Communication is important within the parental couple and within the family system as family members make their expectations and needs known at this difficult time. Following an early pregnancy loss, family members and friends may underestimate the intensity of grief the parents are experiencing. There is an element of ambiguous loss as there is "no publicly acknowledged person to bury or established rituals to structure mourning and gain support."[50] Likewise, women and men may not have ample opportunities to discuss their loss and feelings about the miscarriage, as early pregnancies are often kept secret. Although research has shown that the intensity of grief decreases over time and/or with a subsequent pregnancy,[51] it may never really go away completely.

Confronting impending death, such as when a family member is diagnosed with a terminal illness or experiences a rapid decline in health, can create significant challenges throughout the family system. Communication rules influence how members of the family system communicate during this time. At times, an extended illness may offer the

family time to reflect and even plan. Some critically ill individuals or their family members may search for and continue to enroll in clinical trials, hoping to find a treatment that will save their loved one. Family members in their own grief may deny the diagnosis of a terminal illness or avoid talking about the prognosis because they fear it will result in a loss of hope and worsen the illness.[52] Sometimes, family rules block the dying family member from expressing feelings and fears, resulting in loneliness and an inability for the dying person to talk about one of the most profound things that will ever happen in their lives. For example, in one family experiencing the death of the family patriarch, his wife and children were prolonging his life, telling each other that "This is what Jerry wants." His brother found a time for a very frank talk with Jerry about his wishes, and Jerry expressed his desire to die, saying, "I want to go home." The brothers agreed that Jerry should make his wishes clear, and the next day he told his wife and physician that he was ready to go.

In her pioneering study of death and dying, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross suggested that death should be regarded as an intrinsic part of life and discussed openly like other events in family life.[53] If a family confronts the issue openly, all members can go through preparatory grief together, which facilitates the later bereavement process. Dying persons need empathic listeners, including their healthcare workers, who do not deny their reality. Although watching a person die can be devastating to the family members, terminal illness (unlike sudden death) does provide family members an opportunity to address relationship issues and to say final goodbyes. Communication scholar Maureen Keeley and her colleagues describe these *final conversations* as including all of the moments of talking, touching, and time spent with the dying.[54] Let's take a moment to look more closely at what Keeley has found in these final conversations in the following "Family Matters."

BOX 11.5 FAMILY MATTERS: FINAL

CONVERSATIONS WITH LOVED ONES

Grief at the loss of a close relationship with a family member or others does not always begin at death, as family members may seek out meaningful conversations before the death of a family member. In an effort to help us better understand how these conversations unfold, Maureen Keeley examined the communication process during end-of-life experiences in survivors' stories of final conversations they had with a person they identified as a loved one, most often a family member. She focused on the verbal and nonverbal messages survivors exchanged in final conversations and the functions of these messages for the survivors. In her interpretive (qualitative) study, Keeley conducted in-depth interviews with 55 survivors (45 females and 10 males) who reflected on their final conversations, identifying patterns in the types and functions of messages that comprise these profound family interactions.

Among the most important, memorable, and common types of messages found in final conversations, Keeley identified themes of love, identity, religion and spirituality, routine and everyday content, and difficult issues. She also identified the functions that appeared to be central to each of these types of messages. For example, love messages functioned to increase the connection and strength of the relationship. Identity messages functioned to help survivors understand themselves and their roles within the relationship. Spirituality and religious messages helped to validate or revive a survivor's faith. Messages categorized as everyday talk served to maintain the relationship with the relative who was dying. Talking about difficult relationship issues served to "clean up" problematic relational issues, bringing reconciliation to their relationship with the dying family member and/or helping survivors leave the conversations without reduced regrets. Keeley's work underscores the importance of final conversations as a unique way for survivors to communicate and

connect in ways that may or may not have been possible during their life experiences together, as well as a way to help survivors prepare for their upcoming loss. Consequently, her work demonstrates that final conversations in families matter.

For further reading, see Keeley, M. P. (2007). "Turning toward death together": The functions of messages during final conversations in close relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 24*(2), 225–253.

Final conversations may serve an important purpose, not only around the time of death, but also throughout the survivor's life. Keeley shared the example of a daughter who years later recounted the story of her final conversation with her father when she was 4 years old:

> He made eye contact with me and that was important 'cause he was talking to me like I was a real person, not like I was his little 4-year-old. It was like [my daddy was telling me that] you're going to be alright.[55]

Death of a family member by suicide can be one of the most devastating events a family can experience. At times, attempts to communicate suicide plans go unrecognized until after the event. Family members are advised to watch for behaviors such as talking about suicide, giving away possessions, acting abnormally cheerful after depression, and losing appetite. Suicidal elderly family members may exhibit depression, withdrawal, isolation, changes in sleep patterns, lower self-image, and prolonged bereavement. Unfortunately, many relatives refuse to interpret these messages as they are intended. Consequently, communication scholars are working to develop training programs that address dysfunctional communication patterns and parental communication to help recognize and prevent suicide, particularly among adolescent youth.[56]

Serious Illness or Disability

A second type of crisis that invokes meaningful coping processes occurs when families are confronted with a serious illness. Coping with a family member's disability, disease, or serious accident requires major adjustments that can tax a family's physical and emotional energy. As in the double ABCX model described earlier, resources play a key role in response to stressors. In the case of illness or disability, the family organizes its current resources at the outset of the crisis and then attempts to develop new resources to carry them through the crisis. Of course, those with less economic resources may struggle the most.[57] The immediate disruption of the family in no way equals the long-term drain on family resources and energies required to help the affected family member deal with what may be a lifelong situation.

The mourning process that families undergo when a member is diagnosed with a serious illness or disability may be similar to the stages of coping with death, including impact, denial, grief, focusing outward, and closure, each with a communication condition. At the *impact* stage, the family learns of a member's condition. Anxiety and tension characterize this period; family members respond in a disorganized manner. Husbands of women diagnosed with breast cancer have reported feeling "struck by lightning."[58] Usually, the *denial* stage follows, carrying with it a sense of disbelief and distorted expectations. Parents may reject the diagnosis of a child's cancer, finding themselves unable to hear what others are saying about the problem.

Anger and sadness characterize the *grief* stage. For example, parents do not dream of giving birth to a child with health difficulties. Parents may question why this happened to their child, and the other children in the family may question why their sibling has to suffer. They may isolate themselves from interacting with friends or extended family, effectively preventing open and supportive communication. Eventually, family members move toward the *focusing outward* stage, beginning a process of seeking information, discussing options, asking for help, expressing feelings, or forming a support group. The *aA* factor of existing and new resources from the double ABCX model is relevant here. In the case of Erin and Luke Johnson at the beginning of the chapter, the couple began

focusing outward by working to get Erin admitted to a prenatal clinical trial. Signs of relief are evident as the family moves toward dealing with the issues.

The *closure* stage represents reconciliation with reality and a sense of adaptation to the family member's needs. The family pulls together and adjusts in ways that allow the members of the altered system to move forward and to communicate directly about its concerns. In one study of family caregivers of cancer patients, researchers showed that caregivers had returned to normal levels of quality of life at two years post-diagnosis.[59] In another study, the majority of couples reported that the diagnosis of cancer brought them closer together.[60] However, things most often do not return to the way they were, but instead families face a new, altered reality. For example, parents of children with cancer in Great Britain reported that the end of treatment is not really the end of the crisis, as the threat of cancer remains and the process of role adaptation continues.[61] Years after a child's cancer treatment, the topic of cancer is still present in family interactions primarily because of the need for continued health maintenance.[62]

Serious illness impacts the entire family system. Family caregivers of ill relatives often experience negative mental and physical health issues as a result of caregiving.[63] Parents who care for a sick child have little time or energy to focus on other children or on their own relationship, and researchers have reported a high divorce rate among people with children with disabilities.[64] As illustrated in the case of Erin and Luke Johnson at the start of this chapter, however, some marriages do well despite the stress of illness or disability. For example, some husbands reported that their wives' breast cancer had negatively affected their relationship, whereas others found that it strengthened their relationship.[65]

PHOTO 11.2 A child with special needs significantly alters family communication patterns.

Jaren Jai Wicklund/Shutterstock

In addition to parents, children are meaningfully affected by a sibling's illness. Siblings may have a surprising lack of information about the condition, often feel confused, and may wonder if they themselves are susceptible to the illness. Siblings are often unsure about how to talk about their experience and may feel overwhelmed by anger, hurt, or guilt.[66] In other cases, siblings can thrive even during the illness of a brother or sister, although siblings do tend to fare better in families that have fewer demands, more resources, and better coping and problem-solving skills. For example, in a study of siblings of a child with Down syndrome, some reported that they learned patience, love, and courage from their siblings.[67]

The ability of family members to communicate in a direct and supportive manner, and to reframe the situation, can allow them to function effectively in the face of serious illness.[68] Social support is an important factor in helping families cope with a serious illness. In a study of families with a

child who is diagnosed with congenital heart disease, the more social support a parent perceived, the more they reported coping effectively with the diagnosis and condition.[69] The availability of support from extended family members varies greatly, especially when the family with a severely ill member lives miles or states away.

The type of illnesses that families face affects the family's ability to cope. Alcoholism distorts a family's patterns of behavior and communication, affecting all members.[70] If one or more members are addicted, the entire family tends to develop a verbal pattern to cope with the problem. Such families are characterized by the rules "Don't talk, don't trust, don't feel."[71] Serious questions arise: What do you tell? When do you openly seek help and end the secrecy? How do you communicate with a family member who is in an altered mental state while under the influence of alcohol or drugs? The stress in such families is monumental.

Mental illness can also have a profound effect on family functioning. Mental illness is often misunderstood and stigmatized, and family communication can help improve or worsen the experience of mental illness.[72] For instance, families of adolescents with bipolar disorder have been found to have low levels of cohesion and adaptability and more conflict.[73] Adolescent children of parents with a history of depression are more likely to use coping strategies that allow them to adapt to the environment, such as escaping into social media or even drugs, rather than to avoid or try to change the reality of their parents' illness. Clearly, family members serve as pivotal sources of socialization and social support for their loved ones when mental illness arises.[74]

Separation and Divorce

Separation and divorce are transitional crises that often create emotional and practical upheaval, prompting a mourning pattern for adults and children in the family. At some point, each partner likely mourns the loss of the relationship, although one may have emotionally separated from the other years before the divorce became a reality. Initially, spouses may deny

that anything is really wrong and communicate to children or others that "Our problems aren't all that serious" or "Daddy will be back soon, so don't tell anyone he's gone." As the reality of separation takes hold, anger, bargaining, and depression intermingle. Attempts at reconciliation may occur. Painful accusations and negative conflict are often heightened by the adversarial positions required in legal divorce proceedings. Many individuals experience depression, accompanied by a sense of loss, rejection, great loneliness, and/or a sense of failure. Divorce pressures are intensified by the predictable and problematic withdrawal of social support; a "community divorce" occurs when each of the partners leaves one community of friends and relations and enters another, a process that may include loneliness and isolation for a period of time.[75] Old friends may be afraid to take sides, or they may act as if divorce is contagious.

Divorce and remarriage often have adverse effects on children,[76] although some display only minor difficulties and a few may even benefit from it.[77] Some researchers point out that children are better off when not living in households characterized by ongoing conflict between their parents.[78] Although divorce is often a badly needed fresh start for the parents, divorce is quite often a much different experience for the child.[79] Children are often affected by their parents' marital problems long before and long after the divorce; detrimental psychological and academic effects on children may occur from about three years before to three years after the divorce.[80] Over time, the family system recalibrates itself to establish an altered course, including the development of new communication patterns. Siblings may become closer after a divorce, acting as resources for each other (the *aA* factor from the double ABCX model), and their close relationships frequently carry over into adulthood.[81]

One of the more challenging aspects of divorce for ex-spouses is knowing how best to talk with their children about the divorce. Parents may be angry, and they are often overwhelmed.[82] Parents who perceive that they do not have control over the divorce stressors affecting their children (e.g., the other parent's behavior) are more likely to make inappropriate

disclosures to a child about the divorce than parents who feel they do have control.[83] Frequently, children are informed about the divorce but not encouraged to discuss their concerns.

Whereas loss through death involves a socially expected mourning period, there is no sanctioned mourning period for the loss of the "family that was." Children need support at the time of divorce and during the post-crisis period. Divorce forces a division of parental assets, and messages about the availability of money suddenly become frequent. Children who have never been concerned about family resources may be faced with new realities – a smaller home, sharing rooms, moving, fewer vacations, less clothing, and so on.

In one study, participants were asked to recall their experiences of being told about their parents' divorce and how they felt about these experiences.[84] From the children's perspective, five themes of effective communication about the decision to divorce emerged:

1. Both parents should talk about the decision with the child/children.
2. Parents should avoid negative communication about each other in front of the children.
3. Parents should emphasize that it is not the child's/children's fault.
4. Parents should not give unnecessary or specific details about the reasons for divorce.
5. Parents should invite the children to respond or ask questions.

Co-parental communication refers to the interaction patterns that emerge as one co-parent supports and/or undermines the parenting attempts of their co-parenting partner.[85] Co-parenting is most successful when co-parents are able to learn new ways to interact and develop a constructive relationship that prioritizes the needs of their children. Researchers have demonstrated time and time again that quality co-parental communication is an important factor in how children adjust to post-divorce family life.[86] Likewise, some researchers have explored the experience of children feeling caught, or being put in the middle of conflict, between their

divorced parents.[87] The experience of feeling caught leads to the need to feel protected, which leads to higher anxiety and physiological symptoms.[88] Some scholars have found, however, that parents (and mothers in particular) can use confirming communication with their young adult children to help lessen the negative effects of feeling caught on their children's family satisfaction.[89] In most cases, communication between former spouses becomes less conflictual over the years following a divorce. Two of the authors of your textbook (Braithwaite and Schrodt) found in their own research that after the initial hurt of divorce passed, most parents were able to develop a working relationship and communicate in a more business-like manner. The co-parents in their study were most successful when they kept their messages focused on the children, rather than on issues related to their former spouse.[90]

The post-divorce communication that occurs between adolescents and their parents can have an effect on adolescents' coping. Researchers in one study found that adolescents who were more skilled or comfortable having discussions with their custodial parent about divorce-related stressors were able to cope more positively with the divorce. In another study, researchers examining conversations about divorce-related stressors found that when young adult children perceived that their parents were being vague or ambiguous in discussing these stressors with them, the children reported less relational satisfaction.[91]

Eventually, many of these divorced parents and their children find themselves as members of a stepfamily, whether married or cohabiting. Multiple pathways are represented in the quest to reach the point of "feeling like a family," with some stepfamilies adapting and coping with stepfamily life better than others.[92] The good news is that a higher percentage of stepfamilies do eventually develop a functional family system than those who do not, illustrating once again that there is no one "right way" to be a stepfamily. Again, the systems concept of equifinality (from Chapter 1) helps us understand that parents navigating successful post-divorce and

stepfamily life stages, although complex and challenging at times, can form strong families in which children feel supported and secure.

Military Families

Separation and stress exist when a member of a family is deployed to war. More than half (53%) of military personnel are married and 44% of military personnel have children.[93] Family communication and relational maintenance changes during deployment and may be *delayed* (letters, care packages, and e-mails) or *interactive* (phone calls, instant messaging, video calls).[94] Although technology has improved the immediacy and frequency of communication between a deployed family member and their family, this can have disadvantages as well, as a family member might worry if contact does not happen daily or regularly.[95]

Couples who are separated by military service are challenged to communicate and develop relational maintenance strategies that help them cope with the separation and uncertainty. Some report that deployment strengthened their relationship.[96] In one study of wives of deployed U.S. service members, communication scholar Andy Merolla found three different types of relational maintenance strategies used by the couples. First, intrapersonal maintenance strategies included journaling, positive thinking, and prayer. Second, partner communication-related strategies included activities such as e-mail, video calls, sending care packages, future talk, and communicating affection and intimacy. Third, wives reported that social and family support helped in maintaining relationships with the deployed spouse.[97] Other researchers have applied relational dialectics theory (from Chapter 3) to couples' separation during deployment, identifying certainty-uncertainty during pre-deployment, autonomy–connection during deployment, and openness–closedness after the husband returns home.[98]

When communication does occur, both the deployed soldier and family members at home may have difficulties with knowing what to disclose, as well as when and how to disclose it. Soldiers in a combat environment may

perceive they are unable to share their true feelings when communicating with family members at home because they do not want to worry them and because they are instructed not to share certain types of information.[99] Meanwhile, family members at home may use *protective buffering*, such as hiding worries and avoiding disagreements, to try to reduce distress for the deployed person by protecting them from becoming upset or being burdened.[100] Wives of deployed husbands sometimes used protective buffering techniques to keep stressful information from their husbands, as they did not want to increase their husbands' stress (particularly when children were involved).

Although deployment can be difficult, the return from deployment and the reintegration process can also be challenging. Communication scholars Leanne Knobloch and Jennifer Theiss surveyed military members and partners for whom the return from deployment had occurred in the past six months. They found challenges of reintegration to include problems reconnecting, difficulty communicating, heightened conflict, and problems reintegrating into everyday life.[101] Following return from deployment, military personnel may avoid certain topics of discussion with their romantic partners. For example, Knobloch and her colleagues found that a little more than half of the participants in their study avoided communicating about certain topics with their romantic partners, including deployment-related issues such as dangers experienced, confidential military information, sexual fidelity, household stressors, the member's emotions, and future deployment.[102] Military members who reported higher relational uncertainty with their spouse post-deployment also reported more topic avoidance. In another study, many spouses reported lower quality of communication post-deployment, as compared to during deployment and before deployment.[103] Reintegration is made more difficult when one of the spouses demonstrates depressive symptoms.[104]

Military deployment also affects parent–child relationships. Parents are often absent for very important events in children's lives, such as sporting events and graduation.[105] In one study, researchers found that children from

military families reported emotional difficulties at higher levels than in the general population.[106] The longer a parent was separated from the family due to deployment, the more severe the children's emotional difficulties. Youth have reported challenges that their family faced during deployment, such as increased responsibilities and family conflict.[107] Sibling communication during this time becomes more important to successful coping as parents cope with challenges of reintegration.[108] During the post-deployment reintegration phase, some youth reported difficulties with the parent coming back into everyday family routines.[109] However, Knobloch and her colleagues point out that there are also opportunities that children experience during a parent's deployment and reintegration, such as increased family cohesion and developing more independence.[110]

Applying a family systems perspective to deployment and reintegration helps make sense of the challenges faced by families. When a military parent is deployed, the remaining family unit must adapt and make changes. A spouse may need to work fewer hours or more hours; older children may take on more responsibility and household chores; and extended family members may be relied on for help. When the military parent returns, they will find that things have changed, and it may be a difficult adjustment for all of the family members.[111] Roles have been renegotiated, children have matured, families' needs have likely changed, and things can never be exactly the same as they were once before.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we examined communication and unpredictable life stressors. Specifically, we focused on (a) unpredictable stress and family coping patterns, (b) communication and family resilience, and (c) patterns for coping with specific crises, including death, illness and disability, and divorce and remarriage. Over the years, every family system encounters external stress from crisis situations, on top of stress from expected developmental changes. A family system's ability to cope effectively with

stress depends on a number of factors, such as the number of recent stresses, role changes, and social support. Communication may facilitate or restrict a family's coping process. In most families, sharing information and feelings can lower stress levels, facilitating more effective coping and healing processes. Many family members find support and help outside of their family through friends or support groups. Families with flexible boundaries have the capacity to accept support and survive crises more effectively than families who close themselves off from others.

BOX 11.6 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. Did any of the stressors discussed in this section happen to you and your family? What similarities and differences did you notice between your experience and the research presented here?
2. How have you seen members of a family (yours or another family) deal with the same stressors differently? Were members able to help each other by experiencing the stressors differently or did differences create tensions between family members?

Key Words

Bonadaptation
Coping
Crisis
Maladaptation
Resilience

Strain
Stressor events
Trauma
Unpredictable stress

FLASHCARDS

which refers to a balance between a family member and family system, as well as between the family and community

refers to "the central mechanism through which family stressors, demands, and strains are eliminated, managed, or adapted to."

is an unexpected, negative event that inhibits a family from functioning in their usual manner

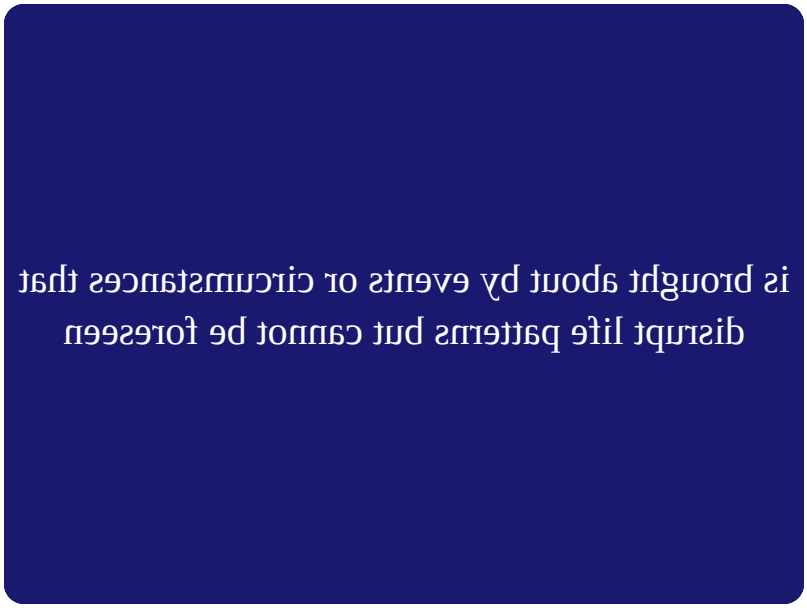
which simply refers to incomplete, inadequate, or faulty adaptation; it reflects imbalance or severe losses for the family

is a family's ability to function well in the midst of adversity

can be defined as tension or difficulty sensed by family members that indicates change is needed in their relationships and in their family environment

which we discuss further in this chapter, are characterized by unexpectedness, greater intensity, a longer duration, and by their undesirability and serious effects

is a lasting response to a stressful or scary event (e.g., accident, assault, natural disaster) that has implications for one's feelings of safety, identity, and emotion regulation



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CHAPTER 12

Family Communication, Health, and Wellness

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BOX 12.1

How do members of well-functioning families live, grow, and relate to each other year after year? How do family members communicate with each other about health? To what extent can family members create new communication patterns and develop healthy ways of loving, fighting, or making decisions? And how do these communication practices contribute to family well-being? After reading this chapter, you will be able to

1. Understand the mutual influence between family communication and physical health.
2. Identify the role of family communication and in sustaining well-being.

3. Evaluate approaches for improving family communication.
4. Reflect on final thoughts about family communication.

SHARING IMPORTANT NEWS

After two years of specialist visits and misdiagnoses, Drew's doctor suggested he get tested for hemochromatosis, a little-known genetic disease that attacks the organs but, if caught in time, can be managed indefinitely by getting ongoing blood transfusions. After the diagnosis, the genetic counselor recommended that Drew inform his family members, particularly his two siblings, about his diagnosis because they were at an increased risk for being affected by it also. His sister, Alisha, lived in the same city and he saw her regularly; his brother lived across the country, and they seldom were in contact. Although telling them about his diagnosis seemed to be a straightforward task, Drew hesitated for months, worrying about how to tell them without alarming them. Finally, his partner, Molly, began to pressure him to alert his siblings.

After more weeks of stalling, Drew finally sent his sister a short e-mail, although he did not go into much detail on the subject. Alisha immediately called Molly, as they have always been close, to ask if this weird-sounding disease was serious. Molly provided information about hemochromatosis, sent Alisha to a medical website, and explained that if Alisha tested positive, she could control the disease indefinitely. The next week, upon Alisha's request, Drew met Alisha for lunch, and they talked about hemochromatosis and the process of testing. During this lunch, Drew asked Alisha to call their sister-in law, Charlene, to inform their brother Kevin about the disease. Within a day, Alisha passed on the news.

FRUSTRATED BY ROUTINE

After nine years of marriage, two full-time jobs, and two small children, Angeli and Dante had fallen into a set of everyday rhythms that kept the household and family running. Every weekday started at 6:00 a.m. with packing lunches, getting the kids dressed, driving to daycare, and heading to the warehouse or office. In the evenings, things went in reverse, with dinner, baths, and bedtime stories carrying the couple into an hour of staring at the television until they started dozing off. Every Saturday meant cleaning, shopping, playing with the kids, and a Netflix movie. Sunday morning involved church attendance before spending the afternoon with Angeli's parents. Angeli and Dante rarely had time alone, and they saved going out without the children for birthdays or anniversaries.

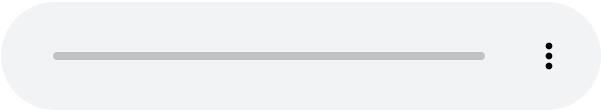
Despite feeling like she had everything she had wanted – two children, good employment, a nice home, two cars, and a couple of family vacations each year – Angeli found herself growing increasingly dissatisfied with her life and her marriage. After a number of conversations in which Angeli claimed she hardly knew Dante anymore, the couple decided to go on a marriage encounter weekend with other church couples in order to find some time to be together and talk about their relationship and their lives. Angeli's parents agreed to watch the children. On Friday evening, the couple arrived at a retreat center for the opening session. By Saturday evening, Dante and Angeli had heard five leader-couples talk about how they learned to make positive changes in their marriages. The marriage encounter approach also included private writing sessions shared with the other to spur conversations on a series of issues that affected their marriage. These conversations gave the couple helpful information as they moved forward in their marriage. One year later, Dante and Angeli have made strides to improve their marriage. They set aside a monthly date night where they go out alone, take a few minutes every night for debriefing conversations, and try to be more affectionate with each other.

Communication researchers Carma Bylund and Steve Duck stated: "Throughout the lifespan, the everyday interactions among family members

have the potential to have a tremendous impact on individuals' construction of health, talk about health, participation in health care systems, enactment of healthy or unhealthy behaviors, and health status."[1] We add that there is a mutual influence between health and family communication. Individuals' health, illness, and healthy or unhealthy behaviors also have an impact on family members' communication. In other words, health impacts family members' communication, and family communication affects health.

In this final chapter, we explore the connections between family communication and family members' physical health and well-being, both of which have important implications for family members' quality of life.[2] First, we discuss family communication and physical health, exploring family communication regarding health behaviors, healthcare interactions, and genetic testing. Second, we examine the role of family communication in supporting individual well-being in the areas of finances and technology use. We then discuss personal, instructional, and therapeutic approaches for creating and maintaining effective communication within families. Finally, as we end the book, we offer some concluding thoughts on the connection between family communication and well-being.

FAMILY COMMUNICATION AND HEALTH



▶ Scripts

Family communication researchers are increasingly turning attention toward the interdependence of health and family relationships. The bulk of this work focuses on marital relationships and marital partners' health status, revealing a nuanced mutual influence of marriage and physical health. In general, married adults are healthier than unmarried adults and have lower mortality rates. This is likely in part because people who are healthier are more likely to get married and stay married.[3] It also may be

due to two protective factors: Married persons have less risky health behaviors, and they benefit from spousal support and companionship.[4]

There are three important caveats to the benefit of marriage on health. First, the benefit of being married is not equal across genders. Husbands gain greater health benefits from marriage than do wives, in part because of wives' greater tendencies to attempt to manage their husbands' health habits. Also, wives are more likely to have more people in their support system than their husbands who usually name their wives as their primary (and at times, sole) confidant.[5]

Second, marriage can pose threats to health by isolating individuals from other important social ties that are important for physical health. People who are socially isolated have worse health than those who have meaningful relationships. Marriage frequently provides a stable and consistent guard against social isolation, bringing with it the health-enhancing benefits of a relationship. At the same time, marriage can be a consuming institution in which spouses invest time and energy into the marriage to the detriment of other personal relationships. Researchers have observed that married individuals are less likely to have regular contact with relatives, neighbors, and community groups.[6] Marriage can weaken ties to other non-romantic relationships and decrease membership within larger communities,[7] so much so that some family scholars have labeled marriage as a "greedy institution."[8] Marriage has the potential to put spouses in a precarious position, relying on one individual to meet a host of their individual and social needs. If the quality of that relationship is threatened or the relationship ends through divorce or death of a spouse, individuals are at risk for loneliness and the emotional and physical turmoil that accompanies it. In fact, spouses who rely on multiple people for social support are actually happier,[9] and they may also be healthier. Individuals with extended social networks outside of the marriage have lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol than married peers who limited social contact outside of their marriage.[10]

Third, it is important to recognize that marital quality also plays an important role in how marriages can promote individual health. Unhappily married persons are generally less healthy than those who are unmarried. The quality of married couples' communication can have a profound effect on their health. Factors such as spousal conflict, spousal over-involvement, and inequality in decision-making can contribute to poorer health. In particular, conflict seems to have more of a negative effect on wives' health than on husbands' health. In studies where researchers have asked husbands and wives to discuss a topic that they have conflict over, spouses' blood pressure and heart rates tend to increase, with wives experiencing greater increases than their husbands.[11] When both spouses in a marriage suppress their anger, their mortality risk may be greater.[12]

The relationship between our personal relationships and our health is complex and nuanced. Before we dive deeper, let's take a moment to get to know communication scholar Kory Floyd in this "Family Portrait" to understand more about how families are important to consider for health and well-being.

BOX 12.2 FAMILY PORTRAIT: DR. KORY FLOYD, UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

Dr. Floyd's website: https://comm.arizona.edu/person/kory-floyd

What drew you to study family communication?

Our families are our original relationships in life and the source of many of our ideas and traditions about how to "do relationships." It's hard to think of a more consequential relational context to study.

What are your main areas of family scholarship?

I study the communication of affection in close relationships, including in families. This work has included studying marital/romantic relationships, parent-child relationships, sibling relationships, and bonds between other family members, such as in-laws. In particular, I have been interested in how affectionate communication influences our success at managing stressful situations in our lives.

How has your own family influenced what you teach and study?

When I was growing up, my own family was exceedingly affectionate, and it wasn't until my adolescence that I realized not every family communicates in that way. This led me, as a young graduate student, to begin studying why individuals and families can be averse to affection.

How can family communication students use your research in their own family life?

One of the most important findings from my work is that affectionate communication benefits us not only when we receive it but also when we send it. When students feel stressed in their own lives, they don't need to wait for others to reach out. Instead, they can express affection to their loved ones and reap the stress-reducing benefits of that behavior.

As the aforementioned research suggests, the relationship between health and marriage is mixed. Whether or not someone is married, they can still be

healthy and have meaningful relationships with partners, family, and friends.[13] From a communication standpoint, a more meaningful exploration of the interdependence of family and health extends beyond marital status. Next, we examine the communication processes that relate to three facets of health: (a) health behaviors, (b) healthcare interactions, and (c) genetic testing.

Health Behaviors

Think about the family in which you were raised: What were the messages about health behaviors? Perhaps your parents said, “Clean your plate if you want dessert.” Maybe yours was a household in which you were expected to try new types of food. Or perhaps your parents let you eat what you wanted. As you reached adolescence, your parents may have established a new set of rules focused on reducing health risk behaviors, possibly including rules about alcohol and drug use, smoking, and sexual activity. The communication in your family that surrounded these events likely has helped to shape your thinking and behavior about health. Family communication impacts family members’ health through communication about health-promoting behaviors (e.g., proper nutrition, exercising) and health risk-reducing behaviors (e.g., quitting smoking, practicing safe sex). In the following, we consider each type of health behavior within the areas of (a) food and nutrition, (b) substance use, and (c) mental health.

Food and Nutrition

A major site of family influence on children’s health pertains to nutrition. Nutrition decisions begin during a child’s infancy. Parents navigate decisions about formula versus breastfeeding in ways that reflect attitudes and values about their children’s nutritional needs. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends exclusive breastfeeding for at least six months to promote optimal infant health and development.[14] However, two factors are at play in breastfeeding decisions. First, some women are not

able to breastfeed their children. For example, adoptive mothers have expressed a desire to be able to breastfeed and a grief over not bring able to engage in it.[15] These mothers demonstrated their commitment to making good feeding choices for their children by breastfeeding their adopted children using medical interventions, using donated breastmilk, and/or defending their use of formula. Adoptive mothers justified their formula feeding decisions by emphasizing their use of high-quality formula, purchasing the best baby bottles, and intentionally bonding with their child during bottle feeding sessions. Additionally, some biological parents have trouble breastfeeding, concerns about infant weight and nutrition, medical and/or medicinal barriers to breastfeeding, or work-related barriers to breastfeeding their children.[16] Second, parental attitudes influence breastfeeding practices. Researchers have found that how strongly the male partner believes that his partner should breastfeed influences the mother's breastfeeding behaviors. The mothers' actual breastfeeding behavior was more similar with what their male partner thought they should do than it was with what the mothers originally planned on doing.[17]

Early feeding decisions set the stage for later attitudes about children's eating habits, which are shaped in family communication about food. Clinical therapist, researcher, and dietician Ellyn Satter developed the **eating competence model** to describe the spectrum of attitudes and behaviors surrounding children's eating habits.[18] This model identifies competent eaters as those who have positive attitudes about eating and food, food acceptance skills that welcome new foods, and internal regulation systems that guide intuitive eating practices to support appropriate energy levels and body weight. In an ideal situation, parents are able to offer healthy foods and guide their children in learning how to have a healthy approach to eating.

However, parents can send messages about food that can disrupt a child's intuitive and healthy eating habits. Parent–child communication is a major site of control and power struggle. Parents who desire to expose their children to a variety of healthy foods can be surprised to experience their

child's resistance to healthy eating habits. Satter suggests that parents navigate food-related power struggles with picky eaters using the **division of responsibility in feeding model** (D.O.R). Parents and practitioners using the D.O.R. model assign specific tasks to parents and children regarding child eating. Parents decide when, where, and what kind of food is served, whereas children decide what and how much of the food that is served they will eat. The model is based on trust and long-term eating habits with a goal of socializing the child's lifetime attitudes toward food. Rather than insisting on "two bites of carrots before dessert," the D.O.R. model allows children agency in deciding what and how they like to eat. Satter explains, "We take a long-term view. When family meals are based on trust, children will listen to their own internal drives for hunger and satiety and learn to eat a wide variety of foods."[19] Evidence suggests that the eating competence model and D.O.R practices are supportive of children developing healthy eating habits.

Early family conversations about healthy eating habits and ongoing family communication about food and weight are relevant to disordered eating and eating disorders. Communication researcher Ellen Jordan surveyed parents and adolescents about parental communication about dieting, weight talk, and body image. She was particularly interested in the intergenerational transmission of **diet culture**, which is

> A system of beliefs that equates thinness, muscularity, and particular body shapes with health and moral virtue; promotes weight loss and body reshaping as a means of attaining higher status; demonizes certain foods and food groups while elevating others; and oppresses people who don't match its supposed picture of "health".[20]

Jordan found that parents' endorsement of diet culture related to parents talking about weight talk more, as well as children's being more likely to endorse diet culture beliefs; children's diet culture beliefs furthermore related to children's disordered eating. Her research joins many studies showing a strong relationship between parents' comments and behaviors

about dieting and weight and children's health outcomes. Children with parents with who encouraged dieting tend to have lower body esteem and are more prone to disordered eating; parental comments about weight were more strongly related to disordered eating for children with low body esteem.[21] Gender differences are at work here as well. Mothers' fat talk predicted daughters' fat talk and bulimic tendencies.[22] Fathers' communicated perfectionism, especially within high conformity families, related to daughters' disordered eating.[23]

Families navigate a fine line in communicating about food and health – encouraging healthy eating can have both positive and negative implications for children's long-term relationship with food, as well as their relationship with their parents regarding control and agency. Let's take a closer look at the family's influence on children's health behaviors in the following "Family Matters."

BOX 12.3 FAMILY MATTERS: MOTHERHOOD AND FAMILY HEALTH ADVOCACY

Elizabeth A. Baiocchi-Wagner and Loreen N. Olson have recently argued that the *family healthcare work* that mothers do should be understood separately from the larger category of household labor that disproportionately falls to women. These researchers interviewed 15 young adults and one of their family members (usually the mother), with the goal of understanding how family members' communication about physical activity and nutrition is gendered. They found three major themes from these interviews. The first was called *Healthcare and healthplay: The family balance*. This described how mothers tended to focus on the work of healthcare (e.g., buying the groceries, encouraging regular physical activity), whereas fathers focused more on fun through playing sports or were inconsistent or detrimental in their contributions. The second theme was called *The health*

(en)forcer: "Typical mom." This theme described the idea that the mother was seen as the one who ensured that family members followed the health rules, and that this role was part of being a good mother. The third and final theme was entitled *The "wow" factor: A mother's double bind*. This theme came from the repeated examples they heard in their interviews of how a mother is expected to do the family healthcare work through shopping, planning nutritious meals, and so forth, but at the same time is held to a higher standard by the family about her own health. The authors describe this as "the paradox facing mothers who are concerned with the health of their families. In the effort to improve the dietary health of family members – running ragged to transport their kids to sporting events, cooking meals, etc. – a mother's own health deteriorates" (p. 138). By illuminating the gendered nature of family interactions about physical activity and nutrition, Baiocchi-Wagner and Olson demonstrated that family communication impacts a family's health in ways that matter.

For further reading, see Baiocchi-Wagner, E. A., & Olson, L. N. (2016). Motherhood and family health advocacy in nutrition and exercise: Doing the tradition. *Journal of Family Communication, 16*, 128–142.

Substance Use

Parents' messages about health issues also focus on risky behaviors such as smoking, drinking alcohol, and using drugs. Messages about health are seldom stated explicitly in a one-time sit-down conversation between parent and child. Two-thirds of parents and offspring report not having those types of conversations, but instead having ongoing conversations about alcohol and drug use. Content in such discussions may include expressions of disapproval, warnings about the dangers of use, and potential health consequences.[24] Researchers have shown that when parents have targeted and frequent conversations with their children about alcohol, there is less

likelihood of alcohol use.[25] The leaders of one study found that young adults are more likely to disclose their own risky health behaviors to parents when the parents are more challenging (e.g., encouraging children to improve themselves) and less disconfirming.[26] Likewise, sibling communication about problematic alcohol use may serve several functions, including reinforcement and punishment.[27]

One way to view family health communication is to look at the rules that families have about health behaviors and how these rules guide family members' actions. Parents use "abstinence rules" and/or "contingency rules."[28] **Abstinence rules** (sometimes called "no-tolerance rules") involve messages that forbid a certain activity, such as, "Don't drink alcohol until you are 21." **Contingency rules** involve context-dependence guidelines for conditions in which behaviors are regulated, such as "If you do drink, don't drive." In specifically examining rules about alcohol use among teens and parents, researchers found that many have a "call-me" rule present with both abstinence and contingency rules, which means that the child should call the parent if they are in a dangerous situation because of alcohol use and, generally, the child will not get into trouble. When referring to alcohol and risky sexual behaviors, parents and their adolescents report using both abstinence and contingency rules.[29] However, tobacco rules are almost all abstinence. As communication scholar Michelle Miller-Day found, using a strategy of "no tolerance" may be the most effective in preventing substance abuse.[30]

PHOTO 12.1 Parents teach their children about health-promoting behaviors in many ways.

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The larger family communication environment shapes how families communicate about health behaviors. In families that are considered to have high expressiveness, members experience a lot of freedom to express opinions and room for individuality. Families that rate high on expressiveness (similar to the conversation orientation we discussed in Chapter 2) rate lower on compliance to health rules, articulation of health rules, and consequences of violating health rules. Parents in these families seem to value individual decision-making, with less focus on a rule-based system, so they may be less likely to interfere in the health decisions of other members. However, in families that emphasize conformity to authority (similar to conformity orientation), adolescents and parents seem to have a shared understanding of family health rules. For example, parents and adolescents in families emphasizing conformity may independently report that a health rule in their family was “our family does not drink

alcohol." Finally, families that are conflict avoidant tend to hold all children in a family accountable to the same health rules, perhaps to avoid claims of favoritism from siblings.[31]

Overall parent–child communication may have a more indirect influence on children's substance use. Families with regular conflict tend to have children who are more likely to use drugs. Adolescents who engage in demand/withdraw conflict patterns with their parents, which we discussed in Chapter 10, are more likely to have lower self-esteem and to use alcohol and drugs. This is true whether the conflict is about allowance, cleaning one's room, or alcohol and drug use.[32] When substance abuse becomes distressing to parents, they often struggle to communicate with their teenage or young adult children about it for five reasons: (a) their own substance abuse history, (b) their concern about harming the relationship, (c) divergent views from other family members or friends about the substance abuse, (d) uncertainty about illness, and (e) illness features (e.g., co-occurring mental illness).[33]

Mental Health

Family relationships are also closely linked to mental health. After reviewing research on family interactions and mental health issues, including depression, schizophrenia, and eating disorders, communication scholars Chris Segrin and Jeanne Flora concluded that "there is an undeniable connection between abnormal and problematic family interaction patterns and family members' mental health."[34] These researchers further observed that it's not always clear whether the poor family interactions cause the mental illness or the mental illness causes the poor family interactions; in the end, it is likely that both are true.

Parents' communication style can also affect how adolescents react physiologically after a difficult discussion with their parents. Adolescents who perceived their parents had better communication were able to better recover from these stressful discussions than those who perceived their parents to have worse communication.[35] Furthermore, Dutch researchers

found that the effect of family communication on family members' mental health may differ by gender. Daughters were found to have fewer depressive symptoms when their mothers disclosed more to them, whereas sons were found to have more depressive symptoms when their mothers disclosed more. Socialization of daughters versus sons and higher intimacy levels between daughters and mothers may help to explain this difference.[36]

Healthcare Interactions

In addition to the various ways that family interactions influence the health behaviors of different family members, family communication also shapes how individual members interact with healthcare professionals. Think about your own experiences when going to the doctor as a child. There was a socialization process happening as your parents or older siblings taught you how to communicate with doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals. Although you were quite young, your parents probably did most of the communicating with healthcare professionals, but as you grew older, you probably became more active in communicating your complaints and symptoms to the doctor. Many young adults can recall when they were first allowed to go to the doctor alone and slowly became responsible for their own healthcare communication. In the end, parents help set the stage for their children's interactions with healthcare providers. For example, a study of African American women found that most sought gynecological healthcare as an adolescent based upon their mother's recommendation.[37]

Throughout the lifespan, family members often act as informal **healthcare advocates** for each other by attending each other's doctor's appointments at critical times. When patients are seriously ill, these family members serve an important function by asking questions and helping patients to recall information later. In one study of consultations with an oncologist where bad news about cancer was given, 86% of patients had at least one companion (family member or friend) present with them. These companions asked more questions than the patient did on average.[38] Sometimes, family members must act as an interpreter for the patient and

doctor, such as for an elderly family member who may not understand medical terms or medical practices. In certain immigrant families, children are usually the bilingual members of the family and frequently must take on this role, creating a generational reversal.

Although having a companion present during a health interaction may be helpful for information recall and emotional support, some issues of privacy also can emerge.[39] For example, a hospitalized parent may be embarrassed to have his or her health information revealed in front of their child, even if that child is an adult. As children reach adolescence, privacy issues may emerge when the pediatrician asks the adolescent about health risk behaviors while the parent is in the room, so the adolescent is faced with lying to the doctor or revealing private information about their behaviors. In some cases, physicians request time alone with adolescent patients to discuss healthy choices and provide the patient with privacy to raise personal concerns.

Family Communication and Genetic Testing

Technological advances have made it possible for family members to engage in genetic testing. The Human Genome Project, completed in 2003, opened the door to a wealth of genetic information available to individuals and families. Genetic testing is now available within healthcare settings to diagnose diseases, guide reproductive technology, and prevent certain medical conditions. Genetic testing has also expanded from medical professional expertise into direct-to-consumer testing. Companies such as 23 and Me and Ancestry.com provide genetic health information directly to individuals. Genetic testing within medical and personal settings offers benefits and poses risks for individuals and their families that must be carefully navigated through communication.

There are important reasons that individuals pursue genetic testing. Genetic testing can offer important insights to guide medical treatment, make decisions about career and family planning, initiate prevention strategies related to genetically-predisposed conditions, and ease health-

related uncertainty.[40] Individuals are increasingly motivated to use genetic testing to gain insights into their personal and family backgrounds. Adoptees find DNA testing to be helpful in providing medical information that might otherwise be unknown. Likewise, individuals with incomplete medical histories are also motivated to gain insights into their genetic lineage, including individuals with limited interaction with one or both biological parents, individuals conceived through sperm or egg donation, or individuals who have a family member with a genetic medical condition such as Alzheimer's or Huntington's disease. Direct-to-consumer testing offers an option of connecting to other genetic relatives in a company's database. This can be helpful for individuals looking for long-lost relatives. Adoptees, former foster youth, and donor-conceived offspring may be able to find previously unknown biological family members.

At the same time, DNA testing poses important risks to family relationships.[41] In stepfamilies or adoptive families, multiple or unknown genetic heritages must be acknowledged. At times, parents' backgrounds or hidden relationships may be revealed. Individuals can learn of half-siblings raised in a different family, discover a sibling who was placed for adoption in secret, or discover that they themselves were adopted by one or both parents. Family members may also discover that there is genetic ancestry of racial groups that can impact personal and family identities. For example, an individual who claimed a Native American ancestry might find that they do not have genetic relatedness to that group, or a family may discover African ancestry that indicates an interracial relationship previously unknown. Increasingly, family members are faced with the delicate task of communicating with each other about their genetic heritage. Newly acquired genetic information can prompt difficult conversations about genetic pre-dispositions, unknown racial and ethnic lineages, and unidentified family members. These often-difficult conversations, unimaginable 30 years ago, will continue to become more critical in managing family members' health.

Families navigate delicate terrain in discussing shared genetic information. Family discussions about genetic risk may center on

identifying who is at risk, deciding whether and how to disclose this risk to family members, and supporting family members who are dealing with undesirable or painful genetic knowledge.[42] The **proband**, or the first person in the family to be diagnosed with the genetic condition, has a major impact on when or if family members learn about their risk, and furthermore, if they decide to get tested. The proband may choose to disclose the results of the test to encourage relatives to get tested, obtain emotional support, and get advice about medical decisions. Remember Drew from the opening vignette – Drew was the proband who struggled with sharing his diagnosis with his sister who he was close to as well as his brother who was relatively estranged. Sometimes, probands deliberately avoid conversation, choosing instead to send an e-mail (as Drew in the opening vignette did) or post the news to a family website. Avoiding disclosure altogether frequently occurs when the disease is perceived as highly devastating or deadly, the relational history with the person to be informed has been problematic (as was Drew's relationship with his brother), or the disease is not manageable.[43]

When the news could be devastating, such as a diagnosis of hereditary forms of breast or ovarian cancer, a proband may be reluctant to pass on the news because it will be so upsetting to affected individuals and the family system. In the case of Huntington's disease, which affects the nervous system and motor control, a proband may remain silent, choosing instead to monitor family members and scan the environment for threatening clues of the disease in a relative, before addressing the issue. High proportions of patients undergoing genetic testing report an intention to tell their family members.[44] For example, in a study of 329 women being tested for the *BRCA1* or *BRCA2* mutations for hereditary breast cancer, 98% reported before their genetic test that they intended to tell at least one of their adult first-degree relatives (e.g., sibling, parent, or offspring) about their test result; 63% reported that they would tell all of these relatives.[45] However, in reality, this information is not always passed on, resulting in **passive nondisclosure**.[46] Probands find themselves in a very difficult position as

they attempt to find a balance between causing the potential psychological harm the information may inflict on a family member and providing critical information that could have important health consequences.

Family members' ongoing discussions about genetic risk are difficult and may not occur for several reasons. Some types of diseases may be more difficult to discuss than others. For example, researchers have compared families' experiences talking about genetic testing for Huntington's disease with other families' experiences talking about genetic testing for hereditary breast and ovarian cancer (HBOC). Findings revealed that family members tested for Huntington's disease were less forthcoming with information than family members being tested for HBOC.[47] In an earlier study of the impact of genetic testing for Huntington's disease on family members' interactions, researchers reported that members experienced significant loss and grief.[48] Siblings found themselves split along lines of those who carried the gene and those who did not. Members who learned they did not carry the gene felt as if they had lost membership in the family because they were excluded from meaningful and emotional conversations. The diversity of members' responses to their test results led to distancing and silence.

Talking to children about genetic testing can be difficult.[49] In cases of genetic risk for breast and ovarian cancer, the offspring usually are not encouraged to be tested until they are 25 years old. Those who get tested may react differently – some may find the tests confirm what they already thought, whereas others may be devastated by their diagnosis. Some may search for more information on the Internet, from other family members, or through healthcare providers. Offspring report both positive and negative aspects of knowing. For instance, advantages include being able to change health behavior and being aware of future genetic testing and surgical opportunities. Disadvantages include worrying about or developing a fatalistic attitude toward developing cancer.[50]

Issues of privacy and conflict may arise when one member of the family gains genetic information and another wants to remain unaware. Imagine a family with Lynn, a 58-year-old mother diagnosed with early-stage breast

cancer. After discussing her family history of breast cancer with her oncologist, Lynn decides to be tested for a genetic condition that is often present in women with family histories of breast cancer. Lynn discusses this decision with her daughters, Julianne (28) and Meg (32), and invites them to meet with the genetic counselor and be tested as well. Meg agrees, but Julianne declines, saying she would rather not know. Both Lynn and Meg test positive for the genetic condition, which means the possibility that Julianne has the genetic condition is increased. Lynn and Meg are now faced with the conflicting desires of wanting to respect Julianne's wishes by not disclosing this information and wanting to give Julianne information about cancer prevention.

As results of the Human Genome Project and subsequent consumer-based DNA testing continues to expand our knowledge of genetics, family discussions of genetics will increase. The future holds great potential for many difficult family conversations related to genetic inheritances.

BOX 12.4 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What kind of health rules existed in your family while you were growing up? How were these rules communicated and negotiated? Were there different rules for different contexts such as alcohol use, drug use, and sex?
2. How did your parents talk to you about food and dieting? How did their messages affect the way that you thought about your body? How do these messages influence your current eating habits and relationship to food?
3. How, if at all, has genetic testing affected your family? Have you considered getting a DNA test through a medical provider or direct-

to-consumer companies? Why or why not?

FAMILY COMMUNICATION AND WELL-BEING

In addition to considering the role of family communication in influencing health, we can also consider how family relationships have bearing on well-being. Two topics that have major implications for everyday life and well-being in many families include finances and technology.

Financial Well-Being

Financial well-being has important implications for everyday stress, relational quality, and long-term stability. Financial distress, including bankruptcy, short sale, and foreclosure can put individuals and families at risk. As one research team argued, however, "Virtually every interpersonal dynamic – controlling, restrictive, aggressive, secretive, guilt-inducing, ambivalent, generative, altruistic – can be manifested in how money is used in families."[51]

Traditionally, the topic of family finances has been viewed as an adult topic, one to be discussed between adult partners. Many adolescent or adult children do not know how much money their parents make or how much money the family has in savings. This lack of disclosure or shared knowledge about a family's financial situation may happen for three reasons. First, money tends to be equated with power, self-esteem, and success and failure. Money is often used by family members to wield power, to show off, and/or to create an image or persona for an individual or for the family as a whole.[52] Second, parents may perceive that they need to protect their children from feeling worried or concerned by not talking about financial difficulties.[53] Particularly in cases where family finances are compromised by layoffs or debt, parents may choose not to disclose this to their children so that their children can go on with their everyday activities

without worry. Third, some parents believe that talking in detail about finances is culturally taboo.[54] This may be something that they learned in their own families of origin. Talking about money both within and outside the family becomes complicated; children may learn communication rules like, “Don’t ask Mom or Dad their salaries,” or “Do not talk about our family’s money outside the family.” Such rules and criteria for revealing or concealing information can be explained by communication privacy management theory, as we discussed in Chapter 3.

Throughout the past decade, family professionals have stressed the need for adult family members to talk with each other and their children about financial matters. Parents are important socialization agents who shape children’s attitudes and behaviors about money.[55] A study of 420 college students revealed that parents had a moderately significant influence on their financial attitudes and behaviors but did not have an effect on their financial knowledge,[56] indicating a need for parents to learn how to discuss, teach, and model financial principles to their children. Researchers have found that open communication environments are useful for facilitating communication about finances, such as credit card behaviors,[57] and for encouraging greater financial independence in children.[58]

Conversations about money depend upon development stages. When talking with children about financial stress, parents are advised to answer children’s questions with as much information as they can handle. Popular advice to parents from work–family expert Ellen Galinsky includes avoiding using certain terminology with small children, such as “fired,” because it may raise images of guns and shooting. Discussions across the lifespan involve middle-aged adults talking with their older parents about their financial status and needs; middle-aged parents sharing their financial status with their young adult or adolescent children, as well as providing guidance about ways to manage their money; or young adult parents talking with children about saving and the importance of managing money and using debt wisely. As parents age and adult children take on caregiving roles, the privacy boundaries that parents have built around their finances

may need to be re-examined. For instance, in a study of adult caregivers and their parents, one scholar found that triggers for greater financial disclosure include physical or cognitive decline, as well as the death of one of the spouses.[59] By applying communication privacy management theory, which we discussed in Chapter 3, you can see that the boundaries between parents and adult children about financial issues may be handled in one of three ways: explicitly (e.g., a parent bringing out all financial documents for the adult child to see); implicitly (e.g., starting to write checks for the parent and slowly gaining more financial information); or through a crisis (e.g., a parent having a stroke and an adult child having to take over).

Discussing financial strain with family members can be difficult as economic systems fluctuate over time. Changes in U.S. and family-level finances can prompt friends or relatives to express anxiety about their financial state, lowered property values, and plummeting retirement funds. A rising number of homeless families, the return of young adults to their parents' homes, the loss of employment by parents in well-established careers, and the struggles of recent college graduates to find employment reflect the lived experience of individuals and families facing financial stress.

Researchers have documented communication responses to financial stress. One research team found that adult family members confronted issues such as sending children to less expensive colleges and universities, setting ground rules for 20-something adults moving back home, assessing whether to help a brother's family with the mortgage, and trying to cut out "extras," ranging from giving up the second car to eating out.[60] Conversations included topics such as closing out credit cards, living without health insurance, and going on a "staycation" rather than a vacation. In some cases, family members discussed whether to declare bankruptcy. Couples experiencing financial strain also increase their disagreements and decrease their quality time together. In a study examining the link between financial strain and marital instability among 5,000 married couples, financial strain impacted both wives' and husbands' emotional distress equally.[61] The lack of couple quality time, compounded

by the need to work extra hours or work nontraditional hours, was meaningfully associated with marital instability.

Not only does partner interaction suffer during times of economic instability, but the quality of parenting tends to decline. When parents are stressed by economic threats and losses, they exhibit lower levels of involvement with, and supportiveness of, their children.[62] In these circumstances, parents are more likely to suffer from exhaustion, often from working extra hours, or from depression, leading to low energy, high distractibility, and decreased expressions of parental warmth and support.[63] Economic stress affects individual well-being and family interaction,[64] thus requiring families to carefully navigate conversations about financial stress and well-being.

Technological Well-Being

Issues related to advancements in technology continue to create challenges and benefits for individuals and their families. Intergenerational differences complicate how families navigate the use of technology. In Chapter 4, we discussed *digital natives*, referring to individuals from generations who have had access to technology from birth. Digital natives think and process information differently from previous generations because they are native speakers of the language of technology. These are toddlers who know how to start their favorite video on their parents' touch-screen smartphone; they are kids who text their parents from the backseat on a family trip. Although *digital settlers* grew up in an analog world, they have become sophisticated in their use of technology, although they also rely heavily on analog communication. These are parents who wonder how they could juggle so many responsibilities without the ability to work from home, pay bills online, and text a spouse to coordinate family activities. Finally, *digital immigrants* are those who were not born into the digital age and who have not adapted easily to new technologies. They may have learned to use e-mail or to go to social networking sites but live much or all of their lives offline. These may be grandparents who go onto e-mail on a weekly basis to

send out a family e-mail update but expect a handwritten thank-you note for a birthday gift. Many families have members who represent each category of digital connection, which may lead to communication challenges or generational competence reversals.

Families exist in an increasingly connected society. Although some scholars argue that we are moving into an interpersonal world in which we are "alone together," foregoing the benefits of direct human interaction as well as solitude, technology is now a fact of life for many families, with members connected to one another across in-person and multiple mediated channels. Family members may text each other when one is in another part of the house or sit together in the living room interacting with each other and those outside the home on social media. Parents and children can track each other's locations, send and receive money, and communicate throughout the day while at work and/or school easily with their smartphones. Rather than viewing digital media as a negative or positive force in family systems, we believe that it is more helpful to recognize that new technologies have changed the nature of family communication in nuanced ways.

Given the rise of devices and connectivity, parents are increasingly managing screen time with their children. Similar to the discussions about food we explored previously in this chapter, screen time can be a source of conflict within families. In a national survey of parental mediation of children's Internet use, researchers examined parental attempts to regulate their children's media use in order to maximize the advantages of the online environment by using strategies such as rule-making, restrictions, co-viewing, or co-using.[65] They found that co-use is widespread; two-thirds of parents discuss Internet use with their children, almost half watch the screen while a child is using the Internet, and about a third remain physically close when a child is online. Although parental involvement had some impact, one major exception was the ban on giving out personal information online, as related to buying, filling out forms, and taking quizzes. The researchers reported that the characteristics of the children determine the incidence of

their online risks, with older boys who had high skill levels possessing the greatest online risk.

In addition to managing screen time, parents and children must negotiate the ways in which their children remain safe and healthy in their online lives. Social media creates safety risks, such as disclosing personal information, meeting up offline with online acquaintances, sharing photos with strangers, or bullying peers. Researchers contend, however, that the more often parents and/or other meaningful adults talk to young people about their experiences online, and occasionally monitor what they are doing, the less likely youth are to engage in risky behavior.[66] In many homes, those conversations do not occur because parents are unprepared to discuss these issues. In the following discussion, we focus on three areas particularly related to well-being: cyberbullying, sexting, and sharing private information.

Cyberbullying

Social media use puts individuals at risk of being a victim of cyberbullying,[67] but parents often feel helpless to prevent it. **Cyberbullying**, or deliberate and repeated harm inflicted through smartphones and computers, presents serious challenges to young people and their families. One practitioner identified seven cyberbullying behaviors:[68] *flaming*, or online fighting with angry language; *harassment*, which involves repeatedly sending nasty and insulting messages; *denigration*, or spreading rumors or gossip about someone; *impersonation*, which involves pretending to be someone else with negative effects on that person; *outing*, or sharing someone else's private, embarrassing information online; *exclusion*, which involves intentionally excluding an individual; and *cyberstalking*, which describes intense and repeated harassment that is threatening or creates fear.

In recent years, the media has provided numerous examples of adolescent suicides attributed to cyberbullying; the phenomenon has become so prevalent that the term **cyberbullicide** was coined to describe "suicide

directly or indirectly influenced by experiences with online aggression."[69] Cyberbullying represents a particularly dangerous form of harm because, in contrast to former decades when home provided sanctuary from taunting peers, cyberbullying has become a 24/7 experience for many pre-adolescents and adolescents. In one study of 2,000 middle school students, researchers found that 20% of their respondents were seriously thinking about attempting suicide due to cyberbullying.[70] The students reported that the most frequent form of cyberbullying involved posting "something online about another person to make others laugh," whereas cyber-victims reported receiving "an upsetting [message] from someone you know" as the most frequent form. Cyberbullying victims were almost twice as likely to have attempted or considered suicide compared to youth who had not experienced cyberbullying. In many cyberbullying cases, parents expect schools to provide justice and protection for their children, although school district discipline codes seldom address authority over student cell phones or home computers.[71] Parental discussions about cyberbullying can be important. In a recent study, researchers surveyed middle and high school students about their experiences with cyberbullying. They found that when students believed their parents would punish them, they were less likely to participate in these bullying activities.[72] Unfortunately, many parents do not discuss these issues with their children or ask their children if they have witnessed or experienced such interactions.

PHOTO 12.2 Parents can monitor their children's online activities.

Tetra Images/Alamy

Sexting

Another technology-related issue with dangerous implications for younger family members involves **sexting**, defined by the American Academy of Pediatrics as "electronically sending, receiving or forwarding messages or photographs that are sexually explicit."[73] Sexting has emerged as a serious problem for many young people and their families. In addition to causing emotional pain and being cited as the cause of suicide, this activity has serious legal consequences. Conflicting information exists about the prevalence of this behavior. Through an online panel study, researchers

found that three in 10 young people have been involved in some type of naked texting, with overall rates higher among 14- to 17-year-olds and 18- to 24-year-olds.[74] Researchers also found that 29% reported receiving messages with sexual words or images by text or on the Internet. One in ten had shared a naked image of themselves. Nearly one in five recipients of such texts reported passing them on to someone else. Approximately 30% reported sharing sexts as a joke or to be funny. Most reported not considering the risks and implications of such behavior. In another study, however, only 10% reported transferring some sort of sexually suggestive image.[75]

Advancements in AI have made sexting a more confusing phenomenon. The use of deepfakes has made explicit content more frequent and less accurate, with confusing implications. Altered photos can appear to show body parts and faces of individuals who did not take or send explicit images. It appears that many parents do not know about this practice or do not believe their children would participate in such a practice. Little is known about actual parent–child communication regarding sexting and the changing nature of it as AI technologies continue to advance.

Sharing Private Information

Another important, but less dramatic concern involves sharing personal and family information through new technologies. In face-to-face interactions, conversations are relatively secure, but that level of privacy does not exist in an Internet-connected world.[76] Family members run the risk of sharing each other's news, or violating their communication privacy, as e-mails are forwarded, posts are shared, and members of every generation use social networking sites. In recent years, increasing numbers of older people have joined Facebook and similar social networking sites, often requesting to friend grandchildren or other younger relatives. In many cases, this results in younger generations changing their privacy settings or switching to using different social media platforms. In fact, a family's offline privacy rules are associated with how children respond to their mother's social media

request.[77] Researchers found that young adults who came from families where private information was commonly shared were willing to connect on social media platforms. In families where private information was shared less commonly, young adults tended to make changes to social media content or limited access before accepting their mother's request.

Not all parents, grandparents, or guardians are able to use the technology well enough to understand these issues or hold meaningful conversations about dangerous online behavior. In some families, older siblings or cousins – rather than parents – go online to see what a young relative posted, such as looking at a social media page to see if any information could be used to cyberbully them.[78] A family that owns multiple devices that access the Internet may find it difficult to monitor them consistently. Parents need to communicate with their children and adolescents about their online lives to negotiate issues of privacy and safety. As more parents become digital natives and digital settlers, more family conversations about these difficult topics will occur.

BOX 12.5 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. How did your family communicate with you about the family's finances? Were you aware of your family's financial situation? How did your adult caregivers socialize you about money and spending?
2. How would you explain the role of technology in your family during your upbringing? Did you experience power struggles over the use of technology and devices? Did your parents restrict your use of social media? How did your communication about technology impact your relationship with your parents?

APPROACHES FOR IMPROVING FAMILY COMMUNICATION

If you believed that communication in your family should be improved, what would you do or say? As families experience developmental changes and unpredictable stresses, members frequently do not know how to move forward effectively. When communication problems exist in your family, perhaps you would be willing to talk with other family members about the communication problems or have your family participate in a structured improvement program.

Attitudes about realms of personal responsibility and control guide how individuals might go about improving their family communication. Many people believe that life happens *to* them – that they have no ability to improve their relationships. Such individuals are **reactors**, taking no responsibility for their contribution to problems in a relationship or for their responsibility to improve relationships. Other people are **actors**, believing they can make personal changes and co-create desirable relational change. Viewing all family members as actors reflects an understanding that communication and relationships are co-created, as we discussed in Chapter 2. Family members have the potential to grow in chosen directions, although such growth may require great risk, effort, and pain. From a family systems perspective, we know that whenever change is attempted by some members, it may be resisted by other members who wish to keep their system in balance no matter how painful that balance is. In the first case at the start of the chapter, Drew was hesitant to share important medical information with his siblings in order to avoid upsetting the family system. It is difficult, although not impossible, for an individual to initiate lasting change in the system; however, change is more easily accomplished when most or all members are committed to an alternative way of relating. Further, it is a challenge for members of the system to recognize certain negative patterns in which they play a part. It may take a third party's perspective and a clearheaded, objective analysis to recognize a destructive

pattern that needs to be changed. Change depends on one's ability to discover the meanings underlying one's own actions and those of other family members.

Strategies designed to support positive family change include personal, instructional, and therapeutic approaches. Most of the personal and instructional approaches are designed for functional partnerships or families whose members wish to make changes in their relationships, or to find ways to manage a particularly stressful situation. Therapeutic approaches are designed to aid a couple or a family when coping with a serious problem or repairing a troubled relationship.

Personal Approaches

Many partnerships or whole family systems attempt to change their relational communication patterns through personal efforts. Personal approaches include (a) seeking education, such as that found through books or the media, (b) engaging in conscious negotiation with partners or family members, (c) establishing ongoing time commitments with family members, and (d) obtaining support from friends or members of a supportive network.

Personal Education

A perusal of bookstore shelves, videos, podcasts, or websites reveals countless resources devoted to improving family relationships, parenting skills, and the ability to deal with relational change. There are checklists, rules, and prescriptions for improving family meetings, sexual communication, and approaches to conflict. The "checkup" stands as a cornerstone concept of the personal approach to improving partner or family communication. Family members are encouraged to call for a conversation on the question "How are we doing?" Taking a family communication course, as you and other readers of this book are doing, can be a helpful first step.

Personal Negotiation

In many families, members discuss new ways to communicate or to manage problems. Identifying recurring “trouble spots” in their relationship and planning how to avoid them is a first step. Members may learn to recognize predictable situations when intimacy or conflict become threatening and find ways to name it and adapt. Some couples create and practice their own rules for effective decision-making and conflict management, and they develop best practices for relationship maintenance, as we discussed previously in Chapters 6, 8, and 11.

How do conversations about addressing problems and changing family communication patterns actually start? Sometimes, one or more family members express their nagging feelings that things could be better. They may have discovered new ideas for partner or family interaction through the media, friends, or religious or educational experiences. They decide to risk trying out new behaviors and evaluating their effectiveness, an approach that involves ongoing mutual cooperation.

Instead of discussing a concern, an individual family member may start by choosing to change their behavior, hoping that this change will affect another family member’s behavior. From a systems perspective, you can imagine how one member’s change in communication may result in another family member’s change as well. We do need to realize that these individual efforts may be met with initial suspicion or even strong resistance.

Ongoing Time Commitments

One relational change strategy involves instituting “couple time” or “family meetings.” Members agree to come together regularly in order to discuss and address concerns and problems. Members at all stages of family development agree to reserve times to listen to one another and “really talk.” Some families find their topics emerge easily and directly, such as during regular debriefing conversations; others prefer to use a guidebook

that prescribes topics or provides questions or discussion material. Sometimes just planning to spend time together makes a difference.[79]

Family meetings or family councils create opportunities for all members to address concerns. Such experiences provide children with important practice in discussion and decision-making. Many religious groups recommend such meetings, as church members are encouraged to set aside one night a week to be together as a family, spending time in religious study and family activities. Topics of discussion might include strengthening family bonds or conversations about weekly activities, outside relationships, family history, or religious subjects.

Support Networks

In an era when many family members live at great distances from each other, individuals, couples, and families are creating support systems to help them face family problems. Informal support networks, such as friends or members of a faith community, provide adequate support for some families. Talking about family issues with those in your support network may help put things into perspective, serve as a point of emotional release, or help rebuild a marriage.[80]

Instructional Approaches

In addition to personal approaches to improving family communication, there has been a significant growth in marital and family enrichment programs designed to instruct individuals, couples, and whole family systems on more productive ways to interact and function. Generally, their purpose is to provide education, not counseling. Couples may participate in marriage and family enrichment programs that attempt to assist relatively healthy couples in developing interpersonal skills that will enhance their relationship, their communication patterns, and their strategies for coping with difficulties.[81]

Instructional programs provide families without major problems with facts, skills, and information to help prevent serious relational difficulties. Countless national and local programs help married or cohabiting partners, parents, and children improve their relational lives, including their communication skills and practices.[82]

Marital/Partner Enrichment Programs

Multiple national organizations offer marriage enrichment programs. These programs, which began in the 1950s and 1960s, are designed to enhance couple or partner growth. Communication skills appear as the core of most of these marital enrichment efforts. Most programs insist that partners attend together, although, increasingly, versions of these programs are offered online. Most people who attend enrichment programs are self-referred and self-screened, and most programs discourage partners facing serious difficulties from attending. The Internet makes it possible for individuals to have access to quality education through online clearinghouses such as the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center. The Gottman Institute provides multiple enrichment programs. One two-day program, the Art & Science of Love, offers couples the opportunity to learn practical strategies to improve their relationships. This workshop is based on more than 40 years of research by Gottman and colleagues, as cited throughout this textbook.[83]

Family Life Education

Family life education programs are defined as "any educational activity … designed to strengthen relationships in the home and foster positive individual, couple, and family development."[84] As with couple education, family life education is offered face-to-face, via video, and via the Internet as well.

One widely known program is Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP), a set of eight-week online classes, which was developed

by the American Guidance Service. STEP focuses on the goals of understanding children's behavior, the natural and logical consequence of the behavior, and good versus responsible parenting practices. The program stresses active listening, I-messages, and family meetings in its workbook materials. There are specialized programs for stepfamilies aimed at normalizing their experiences and developing communication skills to enhance family life.

The Bringing Baby Home program is a research-based and evidence-tested workshop developed by relationship experts, Drs. John and Julie Gottman.[85] Its primary focus is to help new parents navigate the transition to parenthood while maintaining a healthy relationship. The program offers practical tools and strategies to enhance communication, manage conflict, and strengthen the bond between partners during this significant life change. Key elements include strengthening friendship, managing conflict constructively, and creating shared meaning as a couple. The program also emphasizes the importance of nurturing the parent–child relationship and promoting positive interactions within the family unit. Overall, the Bringing Baby Home program aims to support couples in building a strong foundation for their relationship as they embark on the journey of parenthood.

Government and educational institutions have also entered the family enrichment area in response to divorce rates and child neglect or abuse. However, whether and how such government programs impact families and family structures is not well understood. In fact, a recent analysis of government-supported marriage enrichment initiatives in the United States found little support for the impact of these programs on marriage.[86] Increasingly, schools, communities, and therapists offer their services in both in-person and online formats. Such programs are able to reach a wider audience but need to be designed effectively to engage participants.[87]

Therapeutic Approaches

Partners or families experiencing severe relational pain or crisis are most effectively served by therapy. Family therapy is an important avenue for families to consider when their problems go beyond what problem-solving or educational efforts can address. Individual therapy has long been an established approach to dealing with personal problems or illnesses. The one-on-one, counselor–client relationship remains a valid therapeutic approach that can give an individual insights and strategies for managing problems. In the same vein, when a relational system encounters a severe crisis or long-term dysfunctional patterns, family or systems counseling presents an appropriate approach.

What exactly does family therapy entail? In **family therapy**, a therapist seeks to identify family patterns that contribute to a behavior disorder or mental illness and help family members break those habits. Family therapy involves discussion and problem-solving sessions that may involve a group, a couple, or individuals. In family therapy, the web of interpersonal relationships is examined and, ideally, communication is strengthened within the family.

Communication issues emerged as a key feature of the family therapy movement because many of the pioneers, most notably Virginia Satir, focused explicit attention on communication patterns. Early family therapy practices relied heavily on systems theory's assumptions about change and context. Once therapists encountered the whole family system, they realized that often the difficulties of the "problem" member served to stabilize the system and deflect attention from key family issues and that increased parental collaboration served as an effective strategy for breaking up the strong parent–child coalition.[88] Therefore, problems of individual members must be examined within their family context. Furthermore, attention must be paid to how communication among family members affects members' alliances.

Family communication practices and patterns frequently play a role in therapy. After interviewing counselors about couples' communication problems, one researcher reported that the most frequently noted communication problems included failing to take the other's perspective

when listening, blaming the other for negative occurrences, and criticizing the other.[89] Counselors believed that communication problems resulted from patterns taught to individuals by their families of origin. A majority of counselors viewed communication as a manifestation of more fundamental difficulties; only one-quarter viewed communication as the central issue. Although increasing positive communication skills of couples and families can facilitate change, it is a necessary but not sufficient condition to alter a family's cohesion and adaptability.[90] Indeed, an important therapeutic goal is to provide members with skills to negotiate system change over time.

Currently, family therapists also focus on challenging issues of culture and gender and their effects on the treatment process. The growing number of culturally diverse families that need therapy services has led to increasing interest in cross-cultural family norms and treatment approaches.[91] Cross-cultural family relationships encounter differences in such areas as attitudes toward marriage, male and female roles, and the significance of extended family. Although few therapists can demonstrate expertise in communication patterns of multiple cultures, it is essential for therapists to be open to cultural variability and the relativity of their own values.[92]

PHOTO 12.3 A couple often gains insight into their problems when a third party helps to clarify issues.

Tetra Images/Getty

Some critics suggest that family therapy has been grounded in beliefs about gender and sexual orientation that limit relational flexibility – for instance, some have argued that family therapy should use a relationship model that is founded on equality, not gender.[93] Therapists are encouraged to examine myths that partners hold about male and female roles. For example, a husband may complain that his wife is too busy to give him attention, whereas she asserts that her responsibilities at home and for her aging parents take all her time and energy. A therapist who operates from an equality model (i.e., a post-gender approach) would focus on the value of the wife's responsibilities and how the husband might also make contributions more equally in that realm. This type of approach would make the problem the couple's problem, rather than just the wife's problem.[94]

The past decades witnessed an increase in research addressing the overall effectiveness of family therapy and specific issues associated with different

approaches to therapy.[95] More than a decade ago, marital researcher John Gottman and his colleagues argued that marital therapy remains relatively uninformed by empirical research, relying instead on clinical history. In response, The Gottman Institute developed a research-based evidence-tested model for marriage therapy.[96] The method relies on eight components:

1. *Assessment*: The method begins with a thorough assessment of the couple's relationship, including their communication patterns, areas of conflict, and strengths.
2. *Building Love Maps*: Couples are encouraged to deepen their understanding of each other's inner worlds, including hopes, dreams, and fears, to foster emotional connection.
3. *Nurturing Fondness and Admiration*: Couples learn to express appreciation and admiration for each other, strengthening their bond and positivity in the relationship.
4. *Turning Toward Each Other*: Partners are taught to recognize and respond to each other's bids for attention, affection, and support, thereby enhancing emotional connection and responsiveness.
5. *The Positive Perspective*: Couples work to shift their focus from negative aspects of the relationship to positive ones, fostering optimism and resilience.
6. *Managing Conflict*: Strategies are provided to help couples manage and resolve conflicts constructively, including effective communication techniques and problem-solving skills.
7. *Making Life Dreams Come True*: The method emphasizes the importance of supporting each other's goals and aspirations, fostering mutual growth, and fulfillment.
8. *Creating Shared Meaning*: Couples are guided to establish rituals, traditions, and shared goals that give their relationship deeper meaning and purpose.

The Gottman method uses family therapists who are trained and certified through extensive training and assessment and remains the most

empirically-grounded model for couple's therapy. Researchers have shown that although marital therapy creates significant short-term effects, unless therapy helps families to be less distressed, more emotionally engaged, and experience fewer negative emotions, there is a high relapse factor over time. Thus, ongoing research is needed in family therapy to inform therapeutic practice.

In order to change the current communication patterns within your family system, many options are open to you, ranging from individual approaches to the involvement of all members. Communication can be improved; families can grow through effort, time, and struggle. Relationships take work to maintain, and communication stands at the core of that process, but the effort required is worthwhile since ultimately, it is our loving connections that give life meaning.[97] Intimate relationships encourage members to enlarge their visions of life and diminish their preoccupation with self. We are at our most considerate, most loving, and most selfless within the orbit of a well-functioning family.

BOX 12.6 FAMILY REFLECTIONS …

Take a moment to reflect on your own family experiences and answer each of the following questions:

1. What sources have you used to improve your communication with your family members? What was more helpful and what sources created additional difficulty for you?
2. Do you view yourself as an actor or reactor regarding your family communication? How has your approach as an actor or reactor influenced how you communicate and how you educate yourself on family relationship issues?

FINAL THOUGHTS ON FAMILY COMMUNICATION

Just as there is no one right way to be a family, there is no one family scholar who has all the answers on effective family communication. Each scholar reflects their own professional and personal orientation to family life. Historical perspectives tend to be descriptive, reflecting few cultural or structural variations. In his classic work on family functioning, anthropologist Jules Henry identified seven characteristics of family psychopathology. A reversed wording of his findings would lead to the following characteristics of well-functioning families: (a) interactions are patterned and meaningful, (b) there is more compassion and less cruelty, (c) persons are not scapegoats because problems are identified with the appropriate persons, (d) members exhibit appropriate self-restraint, (e) boundaries are clear, (f) life includes joy and humor, and (g) misperceptions are minimal.[98] Likewise, Virginia Satir maintained that untroubled and nurturing families demonstrate the following: "Self-worth is high; communication is direct, clear, specific, and honest; rules are flexible, humane, appropriate, and subject to change; and the linking to society is open and hopeful."[99]

As we have described, families can find advice on healthy relationships and happy families from countless sources. There is popular advice literature based on expert opinion and research, which supports the positions of academic researchers but presents the ideas in a more readable and prescriptive language. The challenge for you and your family is to locate reliable and valid information and advice, especially with so many resources to choose from. It can be overwhelming at times to evaluate the quality of different materials.

There are now sources that target information toward different family forms, such as adoptive single parents, stepfamilies, and same-sex families. You can recognize the value of these ideas as well as the need to be more inclusive of family diversity. Well-functioning families must be understood within their cultural and structural contexts: Communication patterns in a

well-functioning Latinx stepfamily may differ from that in a Black single-parent family system. Open communication may not be possible or desirable for every family.

Low-income families, an often-overlooked population in academic studies of well-functioning families, face challenges such as existing on public assistance, struggling with health problems, and navigate dangerous living conditions. In spite of these challenges, however, many low-income families demonstrate family strengths, including competent communication and problem-solving skills. These skills lead to positive outcomes, such as meeting needs and providing activities for children, that will help them succeed.[100]

As the authors of this book, we hold strong beliefs about well-functioning families. Our beliefs may be summarized as follows:

> A healthy family recognizes the interdependence of all members and attempts to provide for the growth of the system as a whole, as well as the individual members involved. These families develop a capacity for communication, adaptation, and cohesion that avoids functioning at an extreme level. Members welcome each life stage and attempt to adapt to variations in their family forms. Individuals seek to find joy while living in the present and creating a personal and familial support network. Healthy families exhibit levels of connection that permit members to feel cared for but not smothered. Family members make an effort to understand the central role of communication in co-creating family relationships and the underlying meanings of other members' communication. All members find a sense of connection in the family's stories, rituals, and cultural heritages.

Our beliefs have been influenced by our research, counseling, and teaching experiences, where we are repeatedly reminded of families that lack the necessary understanding of the central role of communication and the skills to negotiate their difficulties, as well as an inability to understand the perspective of other family members. Meaningful family connections

require consistent nurturing. In most families, day-to-day routines easily overwhelm members' lives, resulting in primarily functional, rather than nurturing, communication patterns. Families profit from taking time to ask "How are we doing as a family?" and "How can we improve our communication?" Well-functioning families are able to engage in *metacommunication* – they are able to talk about how members relate to each other and how, if necessary, the current communication patterns could be strengthened. Finally, strong families have learned the values of communication, commitment, caring, and change.

We leave you with the following metaphor, which captures the dynamics of a well-functioning family:

> *I like to think of the family as a jazz ensemble, where members move with the flow of what's happening around them, looking for a harmony of sorts, playing off one another, going solo at times, always respecting the talents and surprises surrounding them. Standards, yes. Expectations, always. But everyone moving with the "feel" of the moment and one another. Anyone at any time can say or shout, "This isn't working!" and can challenge other members toward a different beat or movement or settle into a silence that regenerates spontaneous creativity and energy. We do know that "family" isn't a lonely drum in the distance or a plaintive flute on an empty stage. Family is found in the creative energy and interplay of its members.*[101]

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we explored perspectives and research addressing family communication, health, and well-being. Family members have the capacity to profoundly affect each other's health through their attempts to persuade each other to adopt healthy behaviors, their interactions with healthcare providers, and their interactions about genetic information. It is important for individual and family well-being that members learn to address topics

important for their well-being, such as their economic challenges and members' digital habits. Finally, family members must be willing to consider strategies for improving marital and family communication, including personal actions, instructional programs, and therapeutic interventions. Such willingness demonstrates a level of commitment and openness to change, forcing participants to move beyond daily life patterns in order to reflect on and improve their family experience.

Key Words

Abstinence rules
Actors
Contingency rules
Cyberbullicide
Cyberbullying
Diet culture
Division of responsibility in feeding model
Eating competence model
Family life education
Family therapy
Healthcare advocates
Passive nondisclosure
Proband
Reactors
Sexting

FLASHCARDS

sometimes called “no-tolerance rules”) involve messages that forbid a certain activity, such as, “Don’t drink alcohol until you are 21.

believing they can make personal changes and co-create desirable relational change

involve context-dependence guidelines for conditions in which behaviors are regulated, such as "If you do drink, don't drive."

was coined to describe "suicide directly or indirectly influenced by experiences with online aggression."

represents a particularly dangerous form of harm because, in contrast to former decades when home provided sanctuary from taunting peers, cyberbullying has become a 24/7 experience for many pre-adolescents and adolescents

which is "a system of beliefs that equates thinness, muscularity, and particular body shapes with health and moral virtue; promotes weight loss and body reshaping as a means of attaining higher status; demonizes certain foods and food groups while elevating others; and oppresses people who don't match its supposed picture of 'health'

allows children agency in deciding what and how they like to eat

describes the spectrum of attitudes and behaviors surrounding children's eating habits

are defined as "any educational activity . . . designed to strengthen relationships in the home and foster positive individual, couple, and family development."

where a therapist seeks to identify family patterns that contribute to a behavior disorder or mental illness and help family members break those habits.

people who help each other by attending each other's doctor's appointments at critical times

when information is not passed on

or the first person in the family to be diagnosed with the genetic condition, has a major impact on when or if family members learn about their risk, and furthermore, if they decide to get tested.

people who take no responsibility for their contribution to problems in a relationship or for their responsibility to improve relationships

defined by the American Academy of Pediatrics as "electronically sending, receiving or forwarding messages or photographs that are sexually explicit."

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Please visit www.routledgelearning.com/familycommunication for interactive activities, practice quizzes, and other self-testing options.

GLOSSARY

Abstinence rules Involve messages that forbid certain activities.

Accommodation A type of decision-making process that occurs when some fami members consent to a decision not because they totally agree but because the believe further discussion will be unproductive.

Accounting Includes explanations or reasons for other people's behaviors or situations.

Accounts Narratives that provide explanations or reasons for people's behaviors situations.

Actors People who believe they can make personal changes and co-create desirab relational change.

Affective resources Resources reflecting involvement, commitment, nurturing, a the power to give or withhold affection.

Antagonistic discourses Occur when one person advocates for one discourse or perspective and another advocates for an opposing discourse.

Attunement Positive behaviors with the fetus during pregnancy such as warmth, interest, and connection.

Behavioral patterns Made up of different meanings and rules that serve to coordinate the family system and that make life more predictable.

Biogenetic lens A frame for defining family in which the relationship is directly potentially reproductive and produces children, sharing genetic material.

Bonadaptation A balance between a family member and family system, as well a between the family and community, after a crisis.

Boundary Physical or psychological borders that regulate family members' acces people, places, ideas, and values.

Boundary access rules These guide decisions about issues such as what informat to reveal, how much to reveal, when to reveal and to whom, as well as what potential short-term or long-term implications of the disclosure might be.

Boundary turbulence This arises when privacy boundaries have not been coordinated properly and when privacy rules are violated so that adjustments are needed to prevent future privacy breakdowns.

Calibration A process through which family members seek stability and predictability in their communication.

Chilling effect The tendency of individuals to withhold complaints and avoid confrontation with their partner or with other family members for fear of reprisal.

Cisgender Refers to a person whose gender identity corresponds with that person sex assigned at birth.

Cisnormativity The beliefs, practices, and communication patterns that privilege cisgender people at the expense of transgender and gender variant others.

Coalitions Develop when individuals align in joint action with or against others.

Codification A form of commitment talk that is explicitly shared and negotiated within relationships.

Cognitive resources Perceptions of power that family members have to influence their own and others' actions through intelligence and logic.

Cohesion The emotional bonding and closeness that family members experience with each other.

Commitment An ongoing, intentional choice to maintain a relationship.

Commitment talk Verbal and nonverbal communication that supports feelings of secure connection and love.

Communicated perspective-taking This occurs when people demonstrate that they are paying attention to and confirm that they understand the viewpoints of family members telling a story.

Communication A symbolic, transactional process of creating and sharing meanings.

Communication rules Relationship agreements that highlight what behaviors are required, preferred, or prohibited in various social contexts.

Complementary others Individuals who fulfill reciprocal role functions.

Confirmation Occurs when one person communicates in ways that validate the other person(s) as respected.

Confirming messages Messages that acknowledge and validate the feelings and perspective of the receiver.

Conformity orientation The degree to which family communication stresses a climate of similarity of beliefs, values, and attitudes.

Consensus A type of decision-making process that occurs when family members continue the discussion until agreement is reached.

Constitutive rules Rules that define "what counts as what" and help family members understand why they should not do or say something.

Contingency rules Messages that have involve context-dependence guidelines fo conditions in which behaviors are regulated.

Convergence When communication is adapted to be more similar to others.

Conversation orientation The degree to which family members are encouraged t participate in unrestrained interaction about a wide range of topics.

Coping The central mechanism through which family stressors, demands, and str are eliminated, managed, or adapted to.

Crisis An unexpected, negative event that inhibits a family from functioning in th usual manner.

Cross-complaining Responding to another person's complaint or criticism with c of your own while ignoring the other person's point.

Cyberbullicide Death by suicide that was directly or indirectly influenced by experiences with online aggression and/or cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying Deliberate and repeated harm inflicted through smartphones and computers.

Debriefing conversations End of day talk about events and experiences shared between relational partners.

Deception Communicating or withholding information intentionally for the purpo of creating a false belief.

Decision-making The communicative process by which family members make choices, reach judgments, or arrive at solutions.

De facto decision A type of decision-making process that occurs when the discussion reaches an impasse and one family member acts in the absence of clear-cut decision.

Demand/withdraw pattern An asymmetrical pattern of behavior in which one partner pressures the other through emotional demands and complaints, whil the other retreats through withdrawal, avoidance, and passive inaction.

Denial A covert conflict behavior that occurs when an individual claims not to be upset or to have an issue despite sending nonverbal messages that suggest

otherwise.

Developmental stages Critical periods of change (also called life stages) from bi until death.

Dialogue An interactive, conversational involvement between two or more perso

Diet culture A social phenomenon characterized by the prioritization and glorification of restrictive eating habits and weight loss as a means to achiev health, beauty, and social acceptance.

Digital natives A label for children born into a culture that is surrounded with devices and Internet connectivity present in many aspects of daily life.

Disconfirmation Occurs when one person communicates with another person(s) ways that show a lack of regard.

Disconfirming messages Any sort of message that rejects, invalidates, or disresp the feelings and perspective of the receiver.

Discourse-dependence A term that refers to relationships that do not have well-developed cultural models to guide them (e.g., adoptive, single-parent, LGBTQIA+, or stepfamilies).

Discourses Systems of meaning operating at the same time in family relationship

Discursive struggles Family members communicate to navigate contradictions ir attempts to improve and live with multiple and competing perspectives.

Disengagement A covert conflict behavior that occurs when family members avo each other and express their hostility through their lack of interaction.

Displacement A covert conflict behavior that occurs when a person's anger is directed at an inappropriate person.

Disqualification A covert conflict behavior in which a person expresses anger an then discounts, or disqualifies, the angry reaction.

Divergence When family members communicate in ways that highlight their differences with others.

Division of responsibility in feeding model A model of food socialization that assigns specific tasks to parents and children regarding child eating.

Dual-career couple A partnership in which each person pursues a full-time caree and expects to advance up the career ladder.

Dual-earner couple A partnership in which both partners are employed, but one both of the partners work in careers that do not offer a career ladder or the promise of professional advancement.

Eating competence model A spectrum of attitudes and behaviors surrounding children's eating habits involving intuitive eating and positive attitudes abou food.

Economic resources The monetary control exerted by family members as person designated to make financial decisions.

Equifinality This is a unique characteristic of family systems and means there ar often multiple paths to arrive at the same place.

Familism The subordination of the personal interests and goals of an individual t the values and demands of the family.

Family Networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time, boun by ties of marriage, blood, law, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family, and who share a significant history and anticipated future of functioning as a family.

Family estrangement This is one way that families navigate significant or ongoi lack of agreement that demonstrates a lack of family intimacy, ranging from reduced interaction to relationship termination between a subset of the famil the family as a whole.

Family life education A broad field of study and practice aimed at providing individuals and families with the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to build and maintain healthy family relationships.

Family network A group of people within a family system who have established pattern of connecting through social interaction.

Family of origin The family or families in which a person is raised, generally considered to be the earliest and most powerful influence on personal development, and a primary source of individual and family identity and expectations.

Family privilege Benefits received by those who belong to family systems perce by society as superior.

Family rituals Recurring communication events that are voluntary and undertake jointly by family members that honor something important in the relationshi

Family roles Recurring patterns of behavior developed through the social interactions that family members enact in order to fulfill family functions.

Family secrets Information that is purposefully hidden or concealed by one or m family members.

Family theme A prominent pattern of feelings, motives, fantasies, and understandings grouped around a particular locus of concern in a family syst capturing their fundamental worldview.

Family therapy A clinical practice that seeks to identify family patterns that contribute to a behavior disorder or mental illness and help family members break those habits.

Flexibility The amount of adaptability and change in a family's role, relationship and rules.

Forgiveness A relational process in which harm is acknowledged by one or both parties, the harmed party extends mercy to the transgressor, one or both experience a transformation of negative emotions to positive emotions, the meaning of the relationship is renegotiated, and reconciliation becomes possible.

Function Something a system must do, or an operation it must perform, to establi family identity and enact family life.

Gender role expectations The behaviors that family members anticipate masculi and feminine individuals will enact to fulfill family responsibilities.

Genogram A multigenerational map or model that visually depicts family relationships.

Goals Desired end states that individuals want to attain or maintain.

Gunnysacking Involves storing up grievances against someone and then dumpin the whole sack of anger on that person when they pile on the "last straw."

Healthcare advocates A role in a personal relationship in which an individual supports another by attending doctor's appointments and communicating wit medical professionals on behalf of an individual with a medical condition or need.

Horizontal communication Occurs when the persons involved in the interaction possess equal status or power.

Horizontal stressors Issues affecting families that unfold over time, such as developmental transitions.

Individuation A process occurring during adolescence in which individuals sepa from early family and childhood identities to develop and express a unique personal identity.

Influence Occurs when family members use their power to try to change or modi each other's behavior or beliefs.

Interaction goals The desired end states that require communication and coordination with others to achieve.

Interdependent Within any system, the parts form the whole, and a change in on part of the system will result in changes in the other parts.

Interpersonal conflict An expressed struggle between at least two interdependen parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals.

Intersectionality Focuses on the connection between race, class, and gender/sex identity, social class, power, and oppression in different family types.

Intimacy The outcome of an interpersonal, transactional process that involves tw individuals communicating in transparent and responsive ways.

Jealousy An aversive emotion that may involve negative thoughts and feelings of insecurity, anger, sadness, and fear induced by the threat or actual loss of a relationship with another person.

Kinship maintenance Sharing in, participating in, and promoting the family's welfare through managing contacts with biological, legal, and chosen kin wh live outside the family home.

Life-course perspective An approach that considers how families might experien stages differently based on their unique structure, culture, or social identities

Love maps Deep knowledge of mundane and intimate aspects about a partner's psychological world.

Maladaptation Incomplete, inadequate, or faulty adaptation after a crisis, reflecti imbalance or severe losses for the family.

Master narrative A story of extraordinary proportions that is known to all memb of the family and that serves to define what it means to be a family member.

Metacommunication When people communicate about their communication, giv verbal and nonverbal indications about how messages should be interpreted a well as clues to the relational level of messages.

Moral commitment Choices to stay in a relationship based on an obligation to th partner.

Negative rituals Patterned events that produce and reproduce a family's social relations and detract from a positive family identity.

Networked families Families that use a wide range of mediated channels to deve enact, and change their relationships.

Nonantagonistic discourses Reflect dialectical contradictions and often result fr
an explicit mismatch of interests and goals, but do not lead to interpersonal
conflict.

Normative resources Resources based on the family's values and tied to the cult
or societal expectations of where authority lies in the family.

"On-time"/"off-time" events Labels given to the order and timing of family eve
and transitions based on patterns expected in a given culture.

Passive nondisclosure When individuals know medical genetic information but
not share the information with others in the genetic family.

Personal commitment Choices to stay in a relationship based on the rewards
inherent to the relationship itself.

Personal resources Resources that reflect power afforded by a family member's
individual characteristics, such as personality, physical appearance, and role
competence.

Power The ability (potential or actual) of an individual to change the behavior of
other family members.

Power outcomes An attribute of power in family systems that refers more genera
to who makes decisions and is able to influence others in the family.

Power processes How power is used in family interactions that influence family
discussions, arguments, and decision-making.

Proband The first person in the family to be diagnosed with the genetic conditio

Pseudomutuality A covert conflict behavior that occurs when family members
communicate that their relationships are peaceful and harmonious publicly
while privately stewing in unresolved anger and bitterness.

Punctuation An interruption in a sequence of behavior that gives actions meanin

Reactors Individuals who do not take responsibility for their contribution to
problems in a relationship or for their responsibility to improve relationship

Recognition Communicates attention to others' presence or role.

Recounting Chronicles a family's view of their history and is a retelling of
memories.

Reframing Thinking differently about dialectical struggles in order to keep the
elements from becoming opposites.

Regulative rules Rules that prescribe acceptable communication behavior, such a
how, when, where, and with whom to talk.

Relational culture A shared set of meanings, expectations, and rules for interacti that contributes to creating a relatively unique communication system.

Relational currencies Behaviors that promote family affection and caring.

Relationship maintenance Behaviors people use to sustain relationships.

Resilience The ability to function well in the midst of adversity or "bounce back" after difficult life events.

Resources Things perceived as rewarding to an individual or a relationship; they include anything that one person makes available to another to satisfy needs attain goals.

Respect Involves messages and actions that demonstrate caring for others and the well-being; may be directed toward an individual, a subset of the family, or t whole family system, depending on the situation; and involves two primary components, equality/mutuality, and caring/supportiveness.

Role appropriation A three-part, overlapping process of adopting a particular rol via role expectations, role enactments, and role negotiations.

Role conflict Occurs when competing demands are made on an individual in the fulfillment of multiple social roles.

Role enactment All of the communication behaviors an individual uses to perfor role.

Role expectations The models and norms that a society provides for how certain family roles should be enacted.

Role lens This concept refers to the idea that we consider people family when the perceive and act like family.

Role models Persons whose behavior serves as a guide for others.

Role negotiation A process whereby individuals interact and socially construct a structure their reality and give meaning to their roles.

Sacrifice Choosing to give up something in order to benefit another person.

Schemas Organized knowledge structures that individuals use to make sense of different phenomena.

Segmentation A strategy for managing dialectical contradictions that involves downplaying one domain in one situation and stressing it in another.

Selection A strategy for managing dialectical contradictions that involves choosir to focus on one end of an opposing tension and, as much as possible, ignorin the other end.

Self-disclosure When one person intentionally reveals personal or private information about himself or herself to one or more persons that the others would not discover otherwise.

Sexting Online communication that involves sharing messages and/or photograph that are sexually explicit.

Sexual communication When individuals exchange verbal and nonverbal messag in a mutual effort to co-create meaning about sexual beliefs, attitudes, values and behavior.

Significant others Persons viewed as important and who provide models from which an individual develops role expectations.

Situational couple violence Occurs when a conflict gets "out of hand" and leads one or both partners using "minor" forms of violence during the dispute.

Social construction A meta-theoretical perspective that focuses on how we co-cr our social world and relationships, including our families.

Socio-legal lens This viewpoint relies on laws and regulations to define family relationships.

Spillover A process that occurs when responsibilities from one domain of life (e.g work) carry over into another domain of life (e.g., family).

Stories Narratives that provide a history or retelling of what individuals have experienced.

Strain Tension or difficulty sensed by family members that indicates change is needed in their relationships and in their family environment.

Stressor events Difficult situations characterized by unexpectedness, greater intensity, a longer duration, and by their undesirability and serious effects.

Structural commitment Choices to stay in a relationship based on barriers to leaving the relationship and the absence of viable alternatives.

Theory An organized set of statements that explains some phenomenon.

Transactional patterns Ways in which each member of the family motivates and monitors the behavior of the other and is influenced, in turn, by the other person's previous actions.

Trauma A lasting response to a stressful or scary event (e.g., accident, assault, natural disaster) that has implications for one's feelings of safety, identity, ar emotional regulation.

Unpredictable stress Difficulty that is brought about by events or circumstances disrupt life patterns but cannot be foreseen.

Vertical communication Occurs when real or imagined power differences characterize interactions.

Vertical stressors Issues affecting families that stem from issues embedded in the community and larger society (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, ageism, anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment).

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